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THE WIDOW LEROUGE

EMILE GABORIAU

THE MYSTERY OF ORCIVAL

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described by *Arnold Bennett* in the *Evening Standard* of 3rd May 1928 as one of the two French masterpieces of detective fiction.

EMILE GABORIAU

THE WIDOW LEROUGE

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

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CHAPTER I

On Thursday, the 6th of March, 1862, two days after Shrove Tuesday, five women of the village of Jonchère presented themselves at the police station at Bougival.

They stated that for two days past no one had seen the Widow Lerouge—one of their neighbours, who lived by herself in an isolated cottage. The house was shut up. Several persons had knocked without receiving an answer. The window-shutters as well as the door were closed ; and it was impossible to obtain even a glimpse of the interior.

This state of affairs alarmed them. Fearing some crime or accident, they wanted the door forced and the house entered by the authorities.

Bougival is a quiet village, its inhabitants principally boatmen, who ply upon the river. Trifling offences are sometimes heard of in its neighbourhood, but crimes are rare.

The police-commissary at first refused to listen to the women, but their importunities worried him into compliance. He called up a locksmith, the police-sergeant, and two of his men ; and, thus accompanied, he followed the neighbours of the Widow Lerouge.

La Jonchère owes whatever celebrity it possesses to the builders of the railway,which has now passed close to it for several years, with more applause than profit. It is a hamlet of small importance, seated upon the side of the hill which overlooks the Seine between Malmaison and Bougival. It is about twenty minutes' walk from the main road ; which, passing by Rueil and Port Marly, goes from Paris to St. Germain. A steep and rugged road, or rather by-path, not easily travelled, turning off at right angles from the main road, leads to it.

The little troop, headed by the gendarmes, followed the highway bordering the river, until it reached this cross-road, into which it turned, and, after stumbling over its stones and ruts for about a hundred yards, halted before the dwelling of the Widow Lerouge.

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It was a cottage, simple but comfortable, which must have been built by some Parisian shopkeeper in love with the beauties of Nature ; for all the trees had been carefully cut down. Higher than it was broad, it consisted of two apartments on the ground floor with a loft above. Around it extended a much-neglected garden, enclosed by a wall of dry stones about three feet high, much dilapidated—broken and crumbling in many places, and affording but slight protection against trespassers. To this garden a light wooden gate gave access, turning on hinges clumsily constructed of iron wire.

" This is the house," said the women.

The commissary turned. During his short walk, the number of his followers had been rapidly increasing, and now included all the idle persons in the village. He saw before him about forty peasants of both sexes, nearly wild with curiosity.

" No one is to enter the garden," he said ; and, to ensure this, he placed the two gendarmes on guard at the entrance, and advanced towards the house, accompanied by the sergeant and the locksmith.

After shouting several times, he knocked loudly with his cane, at the door first, and then successively at each of the window-shutters. After each blow, he placed his ear against the wood and listened. He heard nothing. He turned to the locksmith.

" Open this door," he said.

The man unstrapped his basket, and brought out his tools. He had already inserted a skeleton key into the lock, when a loud exclamation was heard from the crowd outside the gate—" The key ! Here's the key ! "

A boy, running about with his companions, had seen an enormous key in a ditch by the roadside which he had picked up and carried to the cottage in triumph.

" Give it to me, sonny," said the sergeant. " We'll try this."

The key was tried. It was the key of the house.

They entered the house ; while the crowd, restrained with difficulty by the gendarmes, stamped with impatience, or clambered on the garden wall, craning their necks eagerly to see or hear something of what was passing within the cottage.

Those who anticipated the discovery of some crime were

not deceived. Of this the commissary was satisfied upon the threshold. The furniture in the first room—a bureau and two large trunks—was forced and broken open. In the inner room, the disorder was even greater. It seemed as though some hand had taken a fiendish pleasure in creating frightful disorder.

In the inner room, near the chimney, the dead body of the Widow Lerouge was found stretched upon the hearth. She was lying with her face in the ashes. One side of the face and a portion of the hair were burnt—a miracle that the fire had not caught her clothing.

" The devils ! " cried the sergeant. " Why did they have to murder the woman ? "

" But where has she been wounded ? " inquired the commissary. " I don't see any blood."

" Here ! between the shoulders," replied the sergeant ; " two fierce blows. I'll wager she had no time to cry out."

He stooped over the corpse and touched it.

" Cold," he added, " and quite rigid. It's thirty-six hours at least since she received that wound."

At the table the commissary began writing his summary official report.

" We aren't here to talk about it, but to discover the criminal," he said. " Let details be sent at once to the justice of peace, and the mayor at Bougival, and send this letter without delay to the Palais de Justice in Paris. In less than two hours a magistrate can be here. In the meanwhile I will proceed to a provisional inquest."

" Shall I take the letter ? " asked the sergeant.

" No, send one of your men ; you will be useful to me here in keeping away intruders, and finding the witnesses I shall require. Leave everything in this chamber as we found it. I shall work in the other room."

A gendarme hurried towards the station at Rueil ; and the commissary began his investigations in regular form as prescribed by law.

" Who was this Widow Lerouge ? Where did she come from ? How was she employed ? What did she live on ? What were her habits, her manners, her companionships ? Was she known to have enemies ? Was she a miser ? Did she pass for being rich ? "

It was essential to the commissary to know these things.

But, although the witnesses were numerous enough,

they could give little information. The statements of the neighbours, successively interrogated, were empty, incoherent, and incomplete. No one knew anything of the victim. She was a stranger in the country. Many presented themselves as witnesses, moreover, who came forward only out of curiosity. A gardener who had been an acquaintance of the deceased, and a young girl who supplied her with milk, were the only persons capable of giving any precise evidence ; and that was insignificant enough.

So that, after three hours of laborious investigation, after having undergone the infliction of all the gossip of the country, after receiving the most contradictory evidence, and listened to the most ridiculous commentaries, this is all that appeared any way near certainty to the bewildered commissary :

Twelve years before, at the beginning of 1850, the woman Lerouge had made her appearance at Bougival, with a large wagon piled with furniture, linen, and her personal effects. She had stopped at an inn, declared her intention of settling in the neighbourhood, and immediately set off in quest of a house. Finding this one unoccupied, and liking it, she had taken it, without trying to beat down the terms ; had paid in advance three hundred and twenty francs for the first six months, but refused to sign a lease.

The house taken, she installed herself the same day, and expended about a hundred francs on repairs.

She was a woman of about fifty-four or fifty-five, well preserved, active, and in excellent health. No one knew her reasons for taking up her abode in a country where she was an absolute stranger. She was supposed to have come from Normandy, having been seen at times wearing the high white muslin head-dress of that country. This " night bonnet," as the neighbours called it, did not prevent her from wearing very coquettish costumes during the day ; she wore ordinarily very handsome dresses, very showy ribbons on her bonnets, and covered herself with as many jewels as a gipsy. She had undoubtedly lived near the sea, for sailors and seafaring topics recurred incessantly in her conversation.

Her husband, she said, had been drowned at sea ; but she never told much more, and the impression was that she disliked speaking of him.

Once she exclaimed in presence of the dairy-woman and

three other persons, " No woman was ever more miserable than I was during my married life." And again, " All new, all fine ! A new broom sweeps clean. My sea-monster of a husband loved me for only a year ! "

The Widow Lerouge passed for rich, or, at the least, for being very well off ; and she was not a miser. She had given a woman at Malmaison sixty francs to pay her rent, and at another time advanced two hundred francs to a fisherman of Port Marly. She was fond of good living, spent a good deal of money on her table, and bought wine in large quantities. She took pleasure in treating her acquaintances well, and her dinners were excellent. If complimented on her easy circumstances, she made no very strong denial. She had frequently been heard to say, " I have neither lands nor houses, but I have everything I want ; and, if I wished for anything more, I could have it."

Beyond this, the slightest allusion to her past life, her country, or her family had never passed her lips, although she was talkative, and at times very boastful. She was supposed, however, to have seen the world, and to know a great deal. She never went out in the evenings, but barricaded herself in her cottage as in a fortress. It was well known that she got tipsy regularly after dinner and went to bed very soon afterwards. Strangers rarely had been seen to visit her—two or three times a lady and a young man, and upon one occasion two gentlemen—one old and decorated, the other young and of a distinguished appearance ; these latter came in a magnificent carriage.

In conclusion, the deceased was held in little esteem by her neighbours. Her conversation was often strange, and odious in the mouth of a woman of her age. She had been heard to give a young girl the most detestable counsels. A pork butcher, embarrassed in his business, tempted by her supposed wealth, had at one time paid her his addresses. She declined his advances, declaring that to be married once was enough for her. At several times two men had been seen in her house, one young and looking like a labourer who worked on the railway ; the other a big man, rather elderly, with huge brown whiskers and dressed in a blouse, who appeared very fierce and even dangerous. These men were suspected to be her lovers.

Having interrogated all his witnesses, the commissary proceeded to write out their statements. As he finished the

last page, the magistrate arrived upon the scene, attended by the chief of the detective police, and one of his agents.

M. Daburon was a man of about thirty-eight, well built, and of very prepossessing appearance ; sympathetic notwithstanding a certain coldness ; wearing upon his handsome countenance a calm and sweet expression, although tinged with sadness. This settled melancholy had remained with him ever since his recovery, two years before, from a dreadful malady which had well nigh proved fatal.

Holding his position since 1859, he had rapidly acquired the most brilliant reputation. Laborious, patient, and acute, he knew with singular skill how to disentangle the skein of the most complicated affair, and from a thousand threads lay hold of the right one. None could solve better than he those terrible problems where x represents the criminal. With an irresistible logic, he deduced the unknown from the known, and excelled in collecting and uniting what seemed the most unimportant incidents or most trifling fact into a tight bundle of overwhelming proof.

Although possessed of such extraordinary talents, he was tremblingly distrustful of his own ability, and exercised his power with diffidence. He wanted the audacity to risk those *coups de théâtre*, so often resorted to by his contemporaries in the pursuit of truth.

Thus it was repugnant to his feelings to deceive even an accused person, or lay snares for him ; in fact, the mere idea of the possibility of a judicial error terrified him. They said of him in the courts, " He is a trembler." What he sought was not presumption or conviction, but the most absolute certainty. No rest for him until the day when the accused was forced to bow before the evidence ; so much so that he had been jestingly reproached with seeking not to discover criminals, but innocents.

The chief of detective police was none other than the celebrated Gevrol. He was really an able man, but wanting in perseverance, and liable to be blinded by an incredible obstinacy. If he lost a clue, he could not bring himself to acknowledge it, still less to retrace his steps. His audacity and coolness, however, rendered it difficult to disconcert him ; and being at once courageous, and possessed of immense personal strength, he never hesitated to confront the most daring of malefactors.

But his specialty, his triumph, his glory, was his memory

of faces, so prodigious as to exceed belief. Did he see a face for five minutes, it was enough. Its possessor was catalogued, and, no matter how long the interval, recognised on reappearance. The impossibilities of place, the unlikelihood of circumstances, the most incredible disguises, could not lead him astray. What he remembered, he said, was the peculiarities of the shape, size, colour, and expression of the eyes, at which alone he looked, without noticing any other features.

This faculty was severely tested before he had been a week at Poissy by the following experiment. Three prisoners were draped in coverings completely disguising their figures. Over their faces were veils, allowing nothing of the features to be seen except the eyes, and in this state they were shown to Gevrol.

Without the slightest hesitation he recognised the prisoners and named them.

Had chance alone assisted him ?

The aide-de-camp who attended Gevrol was an old offender, reconciled to the law—a jolly fellow, cunning, quick, and useful in his way, but secretly jealous of his chief, whose abilities he held in light estimation. He was named Lecoq.

The commissary, by this time heartily tired of his responsibilities, welcomed the magistrate and his agents as liberators. He related rapidly the facts collected in his official report.

" You have proceeded well, monsieur," said Daburon. " All is stated clearly ; yet there is one fact you have omitted to ascertain."

" What is that, monsieur ? " inquired the commissary.

" On what day was the Widow Lerouge last seen, and at what hour ? "

" I am coming to that, monsieur. She was seen and spoken to on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, at twenty minutes past five. She was then returning from Bougival with a pannier of provisions."

" You are sure of the hour ? " inquired Gevrol.

" Perfectly, and for this reason : two witnesses, the woman Tellier, and a cooper who lives hard by, alighted from the omnibus which leaves Marly every hour, when they saw the widow at the cross-road, and hastened to overtake her. They conversed with her until they separated at the door of her own house."

" And what had she in her pannier ? " demanded Daburon.

The witnesses were ignorant. They knew only that she carried two bottles of wine sealed and another of brandy. She complained to them of headache, and said, " I suppose you're going to celebrate. It's Shrove Tuesday, isn't it ? Well, I'm going to bed."

" Yes ! " exclaimed the chief of police. " I know where it's necessary to search ! "

" You think so ? " inquired M. Daburon.

" It's clear enough ! We want to find the big man, the gallant in the blouse. The brandy and the wine were intended for his entertainment. The widow expected him to supper. He came, sure enough, the amiable gallant ! "

" Oh ! " cried the sergeant, scandalised, " she was very old, and terribly ugly ! "

Gevrol regarded the honest gendarme with an expression of contemptuous pity.

" Know," said he, " that a woman who has money is always young and pretty, if she desires to be thought so ! "

" Perhaps there is something in that," replied Daburon. " It did not occur to me. I am more impressed by the remark of this unfortunate woman, ' If I wished for anything more, I could have it.' "

" That also attracted my attention," acquiesced the commissary.

Gevrol did not take the trouble to listen. He held to his own opinion, and began to inspect minutely every nook and corner of the room. Suddenly he turned towards the commissary.

" Now that I think of it," cried he, " wasn't it on Tuesday that the weather turned ? It had been dry for a fortnight, and on that evening it rained. At what hour did the rain commence here ? "

" At half-past nine," answered the sergeant. " I went out from supper to make my circuit of the dancing halls, when I was overtaken by a heavy shower opposite to the Rue Pecheurs. In less than ten minutes there was half an inch of water on the pavement."

" Good," said Gevrol. " Then if the man came after half-past nine his shoes must have been muddy. If dry, he arrived sooner. This ought to have been ascertained

before the floor was disturbed. Were there any imprints of footsteps, M. le commissary ? "

" I must confess we never thought of looking for them."

" Ah ! " exclaimed the chief of police, in a tone of irritation, " that's annoying ! "

" Wait," replied the commissary, " there is yet time to see if there are any—not in this room, but in the other. We have there deranged absolutely nothing. My footsteps and those of the sergeant may be easily distinguished. Let us see."

As the commissary opened the door of the second chamber Gevrol stopped him.

" I demand permission," he said, " to examine the apartment before anyone else is permitted to enter."

" Certainly," acquiesced Daburon.

Gevrol passed into the room, the others remaining on the threshold. He took in at a glance the scene of the crime.

Everything, as the commissary had stated, seemed to have been overturned by some madman.

In the middle of the room stood a table laid for one person, and covered with a fine linen tablecloth, white as snow. Upon this was placed a magnificent wineglass, a very handsome knife, and a plate of the finest porcelain. There was an opened bottle of wine, hardly touched, and another of brandy, from which about five or six *petits verres* had been taken.

At the right, along the wall, stood two handsome cupboards of walnut, with ornamental locks and hinges of brass, one each side of the window ; both were empty, and the contents scattered on all sides. There were clothing, linen, and other effects unfolded, tossed about, or smashed to pieces.

At the back, near the chimney, a small closet in the wall for holding the plate was torn open. At the other side of the chimney, an old *secrétaire* with a marble top had been smashed into fragments, and rummaged to its inmost recesses. The desk, wrenched away, hung by a single hinge. The drawers were pulled out and emptied upon the floor.

At the left of the room the bed had been completely disarranged and overturned, the bed-ticking cut, and the straw with which it was filled thrown out.

" Not the slightest sign," murmured Gevrol, disappointed.

" He must have arrived before half-past nine. You can all come in now."

He walked up to the corpse of the widow, by which he knelt.

" It can't be said," he grumbled, " that the work wasn't properly done ! The murderer was no apprentice ! "

Then, looking right and left :

" The poor creature was busy with her cooking when he struck her ; see her pan of ham and eggs upon the hearth. The brute hadn't patience to wait for his dinner. He struck the blow before he'd eaten anything ; therefore he can't say he did it when he was drunk ! "

" It is evident," said the commissary, " that robbery was the motive of this crime."

" It is probable," answered Gevrol in a sharp tone ; " and that accounts for the absence of silver on the table."

" Hold ! Some pieces of gold in this drawer ! " exclaimed Lecoq, who had been searching on his own account— " about three hundred and twenty francs ! "

" What ! " cried Gevrol, a little disconcerted.

But he recovered from his embarrassment quickly, and continued :

" He must have forgotten them ; that often happens. I've more than once known an assassin, having accomplished the murder, so utterly bewildered as to depart without remembering the plunder for which he had committed the crime. Our man became excited perhaps, or perhaps may have been interrupted. Someone may have knocked at the door. What makes me more willing to think so is that he didn't leave the candle burning. You see he took the trouble to extinguish it."

" No ! " said Lecoq. " That proves nothing. He is probably an economical and careful man."

The investigations of the two detectives were continued all through the house ; but the most careful investigation discovered absolutely nothing ; not one piece of evidence to convict ; not the most feeble indication which might serve as a point of departure. Even the dead woman's papers, if she possessed any, had disappeared. Not a letter, not a scrap of paper even, to be found.

From time to time Gevrol stopped to swear or grumble.

" Oh, it is a clever piece of work ! See what care the scoundrel takes of number one ! He's a clever hand ! "

" What conclusion do you come to, monsieur ? " demanded Daburon at length.

" It is a drawn game," replied Gevrol. " We are baffled for the present. The miscreant had taken his measures with great precaution ; but, before night, I shall have a dozen men in pursuit. He shall not escape us long. He has carried off some table silver and some jewels. He is lost ! "

" With all that," remarked M. Daburon, " we are no further advanced than we were this morning."

" Well ! " growled Gevrol. " A man can only do what he can ! "

" Confound it ! " said Lecoq in a low tone, perfectly audible, however, " why isn't Père Tirauclair here ? "

" What more could he do than we've done ? " retorted Gevrol, with a furious glance at his subordinate.

Lecoq stooped his head and was silent, inwardly delighted at having wounded his chief.

" Who is this Père Tirauclair ? " demanded Daburon. " It seems to me that I have heard the name, but I can't think where."

" He is an extraordinary man ! " exclaimed Lecoq.

" He was formerly a pawnbroker's clerk," added Gevrol ; " but he is now a rich old fellow. His real name is Tabaret ; and he has taken to being an amateur detective, as others do to painting or music, only for amusement."

" And to make a little on his own ? " asked the commissary.

" Him ? " replied Lecoq. " No danger of that. He works so much for the glory of success that he often spends money from his own pocket. He enjoys it all. We've nicknamed him Tirauclair because of a phrase he is in the habit of repeating. He's smart, the old weasel ! Do you remember the case of the banker's wife ? It was Tirauclair who discovered that the woman herself was the thief."

" True ! " retorted Gevrol ; "and it was he who had poor Derème beheaded for killing his wife ; when the poor man was innocent all the while."

" We're wasting time, messieurs," interrupted Daburon. And, turning to Lecoq, he said :

" Go and find Père Tabaret. I want to speak to him, and I shall be glad to see him at work here."

Lecoq started at a run. Gevrol was seriously humiliated.

" You have the right to demand the services of whom

you please," he said, in a tone of suppressed passion ; " but I might——"

" Do not annoy yourself, M. Gevrol. I have great confidence in your ability. But to-day we happen to differ in opinion. You hold absolutely to your brown man in the blouse, and I am convinced he is not the criminal at all ! "

" I believe that I am right," replied the chief, " and I hope to prove it ; but I shall find the scoundrel, whoever he is."

" I ask nothing better," said M. Daburon.

" Only if you will permit me to give—what shall I say without failing in respect ?—a piece of advice ? "

" Well ? "

" I would advise you to distrust Père Tabaret."

" Oh ! Why ? "

" The old fellow is too hot-headed ; he owes his success in the police to nothing more or less than his invention. And, as he's vainer than a peacock, he is apt to overdo matters in order to make a sensation. When in the presence of a crime like this of to-day, for example, he pretends to be able to explain everything on the spot. And, as a matter of fact, he will invent a history that will be exactly *en rapport* with the situation. He will pretend, unassisted, to reconstruct all the scenes of a murder, as a professor reconstructs a prehistoric beast from a single bone. Sometimes, as in the case of the banker's wife, he guesses correctly ; but at other times he's very far out, as in the case of that tailor, Derème."

" I shall remember that," said M. Daburon. "Now, it is most important to ascertain, if possible, from what part of the country Widow Lerouge came."

The procession of witnesses, marshalled by the sergeant, commenced to pass before him.

But nothing new was elicited. It was evident that the Widow Lerouge had been during her lifetime a singularly discreet woman ; for, although talkative, nothing in any way connected with her antecedents remained in the memory of the gossips of Jonchère.

All the people interrogated tried obstinately to impart to the judge their own convictions and personal conjectures. Public opinion sided with Gevrol. With one voice, the assembly denounced the big brown man of the grey blouse. He must surely be the culprit. Everyone remembered his ferocious aspect, and how, struck by his suspicious

appearance, they had wisely avoided him. He had one evening menaced a woman, and another day beaten a child. They could point out neither the child nor the woman ; but no matter : these brutal acts were notoriously public.

M. Daburon began to despair of getting one word of information, when someone brought a grocer of Bougival, at whose shop the victim used to purchase her provisions, and a child thirteen years old, who knew, it was said, something positive.

The grocer first made her appearance.

She had heard the Widow Lerouge speak of having a son still living.

" Are you quite sure of this ? " demanded Daburon.

" As I live ! " answered the grocer. " One evening—yes, it was evening—she was, saving your presence, sir, a little tipsy—she stayed in my store more than an hour."

" And she said——"

" I can picture it all here," continued the grocer ; " she was leaning against the counter near the scales. She was jesting with a fisherman of Marly, Father Husson, who can tell you the same ; and she called him a fresh-water sailor. ' My husband,' said she, ' would sometimes remain a couple of years on a voyage, and used to bring me back cocoanuts. I have a boy who is also a sailor, like his dead father—a sailor in the navy.' "

" Did she mention her son's name ? "

" Not that evening ; but another evening, when she was—well, if I must say it—drunk, she told us her son was called Jacques, and she hadn't seen him for a very long time."

" Did she speak ill of her husband ? "

" Never ! She only said he was jealous and brutal, and used to beat her unmercifully ; but he was a good man at heart. He had a weak head, and had some queer ideas : he was stupid, but, deep down, a very good, kind man."

" Did her son ever come to see her while she lived here ? "

" She never told me of it."

" Did she spend much money with you ? "

" Sometimes. About sixty francs a month ; sometimes more, when she bought some old brandy. She was a good customer, poor woman ! "

The grocer, knowing no more, was dismissed.

The child, who was now brought forward, belonged to parents in easy circumstances. Tall and strong for his age, he had bright, intelligent eyes, and features expressive of watchfulness and cunning. The presence of the detectives did not intimidate him.

" Let us hear, my boy," said Daburon, " what you know."

" Monsieur, a few days ago—Sunday last—I saw a man at Madame Lerouge's garden-gate."

" At what time of the day ? "

" In the morning. I was going to church for the second mass."

" Well, and this was a big brown man, dressed in a blouse ? "

" No, monsieur : he was short, very fat, and old."

" You are sure you are not mistaken ? "

" Certain, monsieur," replied the lad ; " I saw him close, face to face ; I spoke to him."

" Tell me, then, what occurred ? "

" Well, monsieur, I was passing, when I saw this fat man at the gate. He appeared very ratty—oh, awfully vexed ! His face was red, or rather purple, as far as the middle of his head, which I could see very well ; for it was bare, and had very little hair on it."

" And did he speak to you first ? "

" Yes, monsieur, he saw me, and called out, ' Halloa ! young man ! ' I went up to him ; and he asked me if I had got a good pair of legs ? I answered, yes. Then he took me by the ear, but without hurting me, and said, ' Since that is so, if you will run an errand for me, I will give you ten sous. Run as far as the Seine ; and, when you reach the quay, you will see a large sloop moored. Go on board, and ask to see the captain, Gervaise : he will be there. Tell him that he can slip his cable—that I am ready.' Then he put ten sous in my hand ; and I went."

" If all the witnesses were like this bright little fellow," murmured the commissary, " what a pleasure it would be ! "

" Now," said Daburon, " tell us what you did."

" I went to the sloop, monsieur, and found the man, and I told him ; and that's all."

Gevrol, who had listened with the most lively attention, leaned over towards the ear of M. Daburon.

" Will you permit me to ask the boy a few questions ? " he said, in a low voice.

" Certainly, M. Gevrol."

" Tell us, my little friend," asked Gevrol, " if you saw this man again, would you know him ? "

" Oh, yes ! "

" Then there was something remarkable about him ? "

" Yes, I should think so ! His face was like a brickbat ! "

" And is that all ? "

" Well, yes, monsieur."

" Can you remember how he was dressed? Had he a blouse ? "

" No : it was a coat. It had large top pockets ; and from one of them peeped out the half of a blue-spotted pocket-handkerchief."

" What were his trousers like ? "

" I don't remember them."

" And his waistcoat ? "

" Let me see," answered the child. " I don't think he wore one. And yet—no, I remember he didn't wear one : he had a long cravat, fastened near his neck by a large ring."

" Ah ! " said Gevrol, with an air of satisfaction, " you're a bright boy ; and I wager that, if you try hard to remember, you can find more particulars than those you have given us."

The boy dropped his head, and remained silent. From the knitting of his young brows, it was plain he was making a violent effort of memory. " Yes," he cried suddenly, " I remember another thing."

" What ? "

" The man wore very large rings in his ears."

" Bravo ! " cried Gevrol, " here is an identification complete. I shall find this gentleman with the ear-rings again. You may prepare a warrant for his arrest."

" I think the testimony of this child is of the highest importance," replied M. Daburon ; and he turned to the boy.

" Can you tell us, my boy, what this sloop was loaded with ? " demanded M. Daburon.

" No, monsieur, I couldn't see, because it was decked."

" Which way was she going, up the river or down ? "

" Neither, monsieur ; she was moored."

" Now think well," said Gevrol. " The judge asks you which way the bow of the sloop was turned—towards Paris or towards Marly ? "

" The two ends of a sloop are alike to me."

The chief of police made a gesture of disappointment.

" At least," said he, addressing the child again, " you noticed the name of the sloop ? You can read, I suppose ; you must surely have seen the name of the vessel you went aboard of ? "

" No, I didn't see any name," said the little boy.

" If this sloop was moored a few steps from the quay," remarked M. Daburon, " it was probably noticed by the inhabitants of Bougival."

" That is true," approved the commissary.

" Besides," said Gevrol, " the sailors must have come ashore. I shall find out all about it at the wine-shop. But this Captain Gervaise, my little friend, what was he like ? "

" Like all the sailors hereabouts, monsieur."

The child was preparing to depart, when the judge recalled him.

" Before you go, tell me, have you spoken to anyone of this meeting before to-day ? "

" I told all to mamma, when I got back from church, and gave her the ten sous."

" And you've told us all the truth ? " continued the judge. " You know that it is a grave matter to attempt to leave out anything ; and it is my duty to warn you that the law inflicts the most terrible punishment upon liars."

The little fellow blushed, and dropped his eyes.

" I see," pursued Daburon, " that you have concealed something from us. Don't you know that the police are not to be trifled with ? "

" Pardon, monsieur," cried the boy, bursting into tears —" pardon. Don't punish me, and I will never do so again."

" Tell us, then, how you have deceived us ? "

" It was not ten sous, monsieur, that the man gave me ; it was twenty sous. I only gave half to mamma ; and I kept the rest to buy marbles with."

" My little friend," Daburon said, " I'll forgive you this time. But let it be a lesson for the remainder of your life."

CHAPTER II

The two last statements awakened in Daburon's mind some slight gleams of hope.

" I will go at once to Bougival, if you approve," suggested Gevrol.

" Perhaps it would be as well to wait a little," answered Daburon. " This man was seen on Sunday morning : we might inquire into the Widow Lerouge's movements on that day."

Three neighbours were called. They all declared that the widow had kept her bed all Sunday. To one woman who had visited her, hearing that she was sick, she said, " Ah ! I have had a terrible adventure to-day." Nobody attached any importance to these words at the time.

" The man with the rings in his ears becomes more and more important," said the judge, when the women had retired. " It's essential to find him again : you will look after this, M. Gevrol."

" Within a week I shall have him," replied the chief of police, " if I have to search every vessel on the Seine, from its source to the ocean. I know the name of the captain —Gervaise. The Bureau of Navigation may tell me the rest."

He was interrupted by Lecoq, who rushed into the house breathless.

" Here is Père Tabaret," said he. " I met him setting out. What a man ! He wouldn't wait for the train, but paid I don't know how much for a carriage ; and we drove here in fifty minutes ! "

Almost immediately an old man appeared at the door, whose aspect bore little resemblance to the ideal portraits of the secret agent of police.

His round face wore an expression of perpetual astonishment, mingled with uneasiness, which would have made the fortunes of a dozen comic actors of the Palais Royale. Scrupulously shaved, he had a very short chin, large and good-natured lips, and a nose disagreeably elevated. His eyes, of a dull grey, were small, bordered by rings of scarlet, and absolutely void of expression ; yet they fatigued the observer by their insupportable restlessness. Thin hairs

brushed flat upon his head, light as the fur of a rabbit, barely concealed his long ears, which were large, wide, and spreading away from the skull.

He was comfortably dressed, neat as a new franc piece, displaying linen of dazzling whiteness, and wearing silk gloves and leather gaiters. A long and massive chain of gold, of a deplorable taste, was twisted thrice round his neck, and fell in cascades to his vest-pocket.

Père Tabaret, nicknamed Tirauclair, standing at the threshold, bowed almost to the ground, bending his old back into an arch, and in the humblest of voices demanded :

" You have deigned to send for me."

" Yes," replied Daburon, adding under his breath : " and, if you are a man of any ability, there is at least nothing to indicate it in your appearance."

" I am here," continued the old fellow, " completely at the service of justice."

" I wish to know," replied the magistrate, " whether you cannot, with more success than has attended our efforts, discover some indication that may serve to put us upon the track of the author of this atrocious crime. I will explain the——"

" Oh, I know enough of it ! " interrupted Père Tabaret. " Lecoq has told me as much as I desire to know. And, if you will permit me, I prefer to proceed without receiving any information, in order to be more fully master of my own impression. If you know another's opinion, it can't help influencing your judgment. I will, if you please, at once commence my researches, with Lecoq's assistance."

As the old fellow spoke, his little grey eyes dilated, and became brilliant as carbuncles. His face reflected an internal satisfaction ; even his wrinkles seemed to laugh. His figure became erect, his step almost elastic, as he darted rather than walked into the second chamber.

He remained there about half an hour ; then came out running, then re-entered and came out again ; again re-entered, and again reappeared almost immediately. Daburon could not help comparing him to a pointer on the scent ; restless and active, he ran hither and thither, carrying his nose in the air, as if to discover some subtle odour left by the assassin. All the while he talked loudly and with much gesticulation, apostrophising himself, scolding himself, uttering little cries of triumph or self-encouragement.

He did not allow Lecoq to have a moment's rest. He wanted this or that or the other thing. He demanded paper and a pencil. Then he wanted a spade ; and finally he cried out for plaster of paris and a bottle of oil. With these he left the cottage.

When more than an hour had elapsed, the judge of inquiry began to lose patience, and asked what had become of the amateur detective.

" He is on the road," replied the sergeant, " lying flat in the mud. He has mixed the plaster in a plate. He says he is nearly finished, and that he is coming back presently."

Tabaret entered almost instantly, joyous, triumphant, looking at least twenty years younger. Lecoq followed him, carrying with the utmost precaution a large pannier.

" I have it ! " said he, " completely. It is as plain as noonday. Lecoq, my lad, put the pannier on the table."

Gevrol at this moment returned from his expedition equally delighted.

" I am on the track of the man with the rings in his ears," he said ; " the sloop went down the river. I have obtained an exact description of Captain Gervaise."

" What have you done, M. Tabaret ? " said Daburon.

The old fellow carefully emptied upon the table the contents of the pannier—a huge lump of potter's clay, several large sheets of paper, and three or four small morsels of plaster still damp. Standing behind this table, he presented a grotesque resemblance to a mountebank conjurer, who in the public squares makes puddings in hats, swallows swords, and eats fire. His dress was in a singular state ; he was mud to the chin.

" In the first place," he said at last, in a tone of affected modesty, " robbery has had nothing to do with the crime that occupies our attention."

" On the contrary——" muttered Gevrol.

" I shall prove it," continued Père Tabaret, " by the evidence. By and by I shall offer my humble opinion as to the real motive.

" In the second place, the assassin arrived here before half-past nine ; that is to say, before the rain fell. No more than M. Gevrol have I been able to discover traces of muddy footsteps ; but under the table, on the spot where his feet rested, I find dust. We are thus assured of the hour. The widow did not expect her visitor. She had commenced

undressing, and was about to wind up her cuckoo clock when he knocked."

" These are absolute details ! " cried the commissary.

" But easily established," replied the amateur. " Examine this cuckoo clock ; it is one of those which run fourteen or fifteen hours at most. Now it is more than probable, it is certain, that the widow wound it up every evening before going to bed.

" How, then, should the clock have stopped at nine ? She must have touched it at that hour. At the moment she was drawing the chain, the assassin knocked. In proof, I show this chair below the clock, and on the seat a very plain mark of a foot. Now look at the dress of the victim. The waist of her gown is taken off. In order to open the door more quickly, she did not wait to put it on again, but hastily threw an old shawl over her shoulders."

" Yes ! " exclaimed the sergeant, evidently filled with admiration.

" The widow," continued the old fellow, " knew the person who knocked. Her haste to open the door gives rise to this conjecture ; what follows proves it. The assassin then gained admission without difficulty. He was a young man, a little above the middle height, elegantly dressed. He wore on that evening a high hat. He carried an umbrella, and smoked a Trabucos with a cigar-holder."

" Ridiculous ! " cried Gevrol. " This is too strong."

" Too strong for you perhaps," retorted Père Tabaret. " At all events, it is the truth. If you have not been minute in your examinations, there is no reason why I shouldn't be. I search, and I find. Too strong, say you ? Well, deign to glance at these morsels of damp plaster. They represent the heels of the boots worn by the assassin, of which I found a most perfect impression near the ditch, where the key was picked up. On these sheets of paper I have marked in outline the imprint of the foot, which I cannot take up, because it is in the gravel.

" Look ! heel high, instep pronounced, sole small and narrow—an elegant boot, belonging to a foot well cared for, evidently. Look for this impression all along the road ; and you will find it twice repeated. Then you will find it five times repeated in the garden ; and these footprints prove, by the way, that the stranger knocked not at the door, but at the window-shutter, beneath which shone a gleam of

light. Near the entrance of the garden, the man made a leap to avoid a square flower-bed ; the point of the foot, more deeply imprinted than usual, shows it. He leaped more than two yards with ease, proving that he is active, and therefore young."

Père Tabaret spoke now in a low voice, but clear and penetrating ; and his eye glanced from one to the other of his auditors, watching the impression he was making.

" Does the hat astonish you, Gevrol ? " pursued Père Tabaret. " Just look at this circle traced in the dust on the marble of the *secrétaire*. That was where he placed his hat : so we arrive at the shape and size of the crown ; and the height is, at least, presumable. Now the assassin put his hands on the top shelf of the cupboard, to get at its contents. If he had been a very tall man, he could have seen them without touching the shelf ; and, if a very short man, he would have stood upon a chair ; consequently he must have been a little above the middle height. You seem troubled about the umbrella and the cigar-holder ; but they are very simple. This lump of earth preserves an admirable impression, not only of the point, but even of the little wooden shield which holds the silk. Then as for the cigar, here is the end of a Trabucos that I found in the ashes. Is it bitten ? No. Has it been moistened with saliva ? No. Then he who smoked it used a cigar-holder."

Lecoq was unable to conceal his enthusiastic admiration, and noiselessly rubbed his hands. The commissary appeared stupefied, while Daburon was delighted. Gevrol's face, on the contrary, was sensibly elongated. As for the sergeant, he was overwhelmed.

" Now," continued the old fellow, " follow me closely. We have traced the young man into the house. How he explained his presence at this hour, I do not know ; this much is certain, he told the widow he had not dined. The honest woman was delighted to hear it, and at once set to work to prepare a meal. This meal was not for herself ; for in the cupboard I find the remains of her dinner. She had dined on fish. The autopsy will confirm the truth of this conjecture. You can see the rest for yourself. There is but one glass on the table, and one knife. Who was this young man ? Evidently the widow looked upon him as a man of rank superior to her own ; for in the small plate-closet is a tablecloth suitable enough for her, but not at all good

enough for him. For her guest she brought out one of white linen, and much handsomer. For him she sets this magnificent glass—a present, no doubt—and this knife with the ivory handle."

" That is all true," murmured Daburon—" very true."

" Now, then, we have got the young man seated. He began by drinking a glass of wine, while the widow was putting her pan on the fire. Then, his heart failing him, he called for brandy, and swallowed about five *petits verres*. After an internal struggle of ten minutes (the time it must have taken to cook the ham and eggs to the point they have reached), the young man arose and approached the widow, who was leaning forward over her cooking. He stabbed her twice in the back ; but she was not killed instantly. She half arose, seizing the assassin by the hands ; while he drew back, lifting her rudely, and then hurling her down in the position in which you see her.

" This short struggle is indicated by the posture of the body ; for, wounded in the back, it is on her back she ought naturally to have fallen. The weapon used was sharp and pointed, and, unless I am deceived, was the end of a foil, broken off and sharpened. By wiping the weapon upon his victim's skirt, the assassin leaves us this indication. He was not, however, hurt in the struggle, though the victim must have clung with a death-grip to his hands ; but, as he has not left his grey gloves——"

" Gloves ! Why, this is romance," exclaimed Gevrol.

" Have you examined the dead woman's finger-nails, M. Gevrol ? No. Well, do so, and then tell me whether I am deceived.

" The woman now dead, we come to the object of her assassination. What did this well-dressed young gentleman want ? Money ? valuables ? No ! no ! a hundred times, no ! What he wanted, what he sought, and what he found, were papers, documents, letters, which he knew to be in the possession of this unfortunate woman. To find them, he overturned everything, upset the cupboards, unfolded the linen, broke open the *secrétaire*, of which he could not find the key, and even emptied the mattress of the bed.

" At last he found them ; and then what did he do ? Burned them, of course ; not in the chimney, but in the little stove in the front chamber. His end accomplished, what does he do then ? He flies, carrying with him all that

he finds valuable, to mislead pursuit, and baffle detection by indicating a robbery. Having bundled them together, he wrapped these valuables in the napkin which was to have served him at dinner ; and, blowing out the candle, he fled, locking the door, and afterwards throwing the key into the ditch.

" That is my idea of the case, M. Daburon."

" M. Tabaret," said Daburon, " your investigation is admirable ; and I am persuaded your inferences are correct."

" Ah ! " cried Lecoq, " isn't he colossal ? Papa Tirauclair ! "

" Magnificent ! " cried Gevrol ironically. " I fear, however, your well-dressed young man must have been much embarrassed in carrying a bundle at once so inconvenient and so remarkable."

" He did not carry it a hundred leagues," responded Père Tabaret. " You may well believe, that, to reach the railway station, he would not risk taking the omnibus. No, he returned on foot by the shortest way, to the edge of the water. Now, on arriving at the Seine, it will not be too strong, I hope, to suppose his first care was to throw into it this tell-tale bundle."

" Do you believe so, Papa Tirauclair ? " demanded Gevrol.

" I will wager on it ; and the best evidence of my belief is, that I have sent three men, under the surveillance of a gendarme, to drag the Seine at the nearest spot. If they succeed in finding the bundle, I have promised them a recompense."

" From your own pocket, old enthusiast ? "

" Yes, M. Gevrol, from my own pocket."

" If they find this bundle, however——" murmured Daburon.

He was interrupted by the entrance of a gendarme.

" Here," said he—" here is a soiled table-napkin, filled with plate, silver, and jewels, which these men have found ; they claim the hundred francs' reward promised them."

Père Tabaret took from his pocket-book a bank-bill, which he handed to the gendarme.

" Now," demanded he, ignoring M. Gevrol with a superb disdain, " what thinks M. Daburon ? "

" That, thanks to your penetration, we shall come to the point——"

He did not finish. The doctor summoned to make the post-mortem examination appeared.

That unpleasant task accomplished, it only confirmed the assertions and conjectures of Père Tabaret. The doctor explained the position of the body in the same way. In his opinion, there had been a brief but fierce struggle. He pointed out a bluish circle, hardly perceptible, round the neck of the victim, produced apparently by the powerful grasp of the murderer ; then he declared the Widow Lerouge had dined three hours before being struck.

Nothing now remained except to collect the fragments of evidence received, which might at a later period confound the culprit.

Père Tabaret examined with extreme care the dead woman's fingers ; and, using infinite precaution, he even extracted from beneath the nails several small particles of grey kid. The largest of these fragments was not above two millimetres in length ; but their colour was easily distinguishable. He put aside also the part of the dress upon which the assassin had wiped the weapon. These, with the bundle recovered from the Seine, and the cast of the foot-prints taken by the old fellow, were all the traces the murderer had left behind him.

It was nothing ; but this nothing was enormous in the eyes of M. Daburon : and he had strong hopes of discovering the culprit. The greatest obstacle to success in the unravelling of mysterious crime is in mistaking the motive. If the researches take at the first step a false direction, they are diverted further and further from the truth, in proportion to the length they are followed. Thanks to Père Tabaret, he felt confident that he was in the right path.

Night had come on. Daburon had nothing more to do at Jonchère ; but Gevrol, who still clung to his own opinion of the guilt of the man with the rings in his ears, declared he would remain at Bougival. He determined to employ the evening in visiting the different wine-shops, and finding, if possible, new witnesses.

As they were all leaving, after the commissary and the entire party had received their parting orders from M. Daburon, the latter asked Père Tabaret to accompany him.

" I was about to solicit that honour," replied the old fellow. They set out together ; and naturally the crime which had been discovered, and with which they were mutually

preoccupied, formed the subject of their conversation.

" Can we, or can we not, ascertain the antecedents of this woman ? " repeated Père Tabaret. " All depends upon that, after all ! "

" We shall ascertain them, if the grocer has told the truth," replied M. Daburon. " If the Widow Lerouge had a husband who was a sailor, and there is now a son of hers named Jacques in the navy, the Minister of Marine can furnish information that will lead to his discovery. I will write to the Minister this very night."

They arrived at the station at Rueil, and took their places in the train. They were fortunate enough to secure a compartment to themselves.

But Père Tabaret was not disposed for conversation. He reflected, he sought, he reconsidered ; and in his face might easily be read the working of his thoughts. The judge felt singularly attracted to this eccentric old man, whose very original taste had led him to devote his services to the bureau of secret police in the Rue Jerusalem.

" M. Tabaret," he demanded brusquely, " have you been long associated with the police ? "

" Nine years—more than nine years ; and permit me to confess I am a little surprised that you have never before heard of me."

" I certainly know you by reputation," answered M. Daburon ; " and it was in consequence of hearing of your talent that the excellent idea of asking your assistance occurred to me. But what was the reason for your adopting this employment ? "

" Chagrin, isolation, ennui ! Ah, I have not always been happy ! "

" I hear, though, that you are rich."

The old fellow heaved a deep sigh, as he recalled what seemed to him the cruellest deception. " I am well off, monsieur," replied he ; " but I have not always been. Until I was forty-five years old, my life was a series of absurd and useless privations. I had a father who ruined my youth, wasted my manhood, and made me the most pitiable of human creatures."

There are men who can never divest themselves of their professional habits. M. Daburon kept his keen detective-mind working at all times. " I don't quite understand," he said. " Your father the author of your misfortunes ? "

" Alas, yes, monsieur ! I have forgiven him long since ; but once I cursed him. In the first transports of my resentment, I heaped upon his memory all the injuries that can be inspired by the most violent hatred. Even now, when I think—but let me tell you all :

" When I was five and twenty years of age, I was earning two thousand francs a year, as clerk in a pawnbroker's. One morning my father entered my apartment, and announced to me abruptly that he was ruined, and wanted food and shelter. He appeared in despair, and declared he had done with life. I loved my father. Naturally, I strove to reassure him. I boasted of my situation, and explained to him at some length that, while I earned the means of living, he should want for nothing ; and, to begin with, I insisted that henceforth we should live together. No sooner said than done ; and during twenty years, the best twenty years of my life, I was encumbered with the old ——"

" You don't repent of it, M. Tabaret ? "

" Yes, I do repent of it ; I wish the old wretch had received his deserts ; for then he would have been poisoned by the bread which I gave him."

Daburon was unable to repress a gesture of surprise, which did not escape the old fellow's notice.

" First listen to me," he said. " There I was at twenty-five, imposing upon myself the severest privations for the sake of my father—no more friends, no more flirtations, nothing. In the evenings I worked at copying law papers for a lawyer. I denied myself even the luxury of a cigar. And still the old skinflint complained without ceasing. He regretted his lost fortune. He wanted pocket-money. He wanted this, he wanted that. My utmost exertions failed to satisfy him. Heaven alone knows what I suffered ! I was not born to live alone to old age, like a dog. I longed for the pleasures of a home and a family. My dream of happiness was marriage—an adored wife, by whom I might be loved a little, children—but pshaw ! when such thoughts entered my heart and forced a tear or two from my eyes, I rebelled against myself. I said : ' My lad, when you earn only three thousand francs a year, and have an old and cherished father to support, it is your duty to stifle such desires, and remain a bachelor.' In the meantime I fell in love. Well, do not laugh at me. I was only thirty then ; and, I may be old and ugly

now, but I was a good-looking fellow at that time. She—she was called Hortense. I couldn't marry her and continue to provide for him. Who can tell what became of her? I lost sight of her. She waited long; but, alas! she was pretty and poor. When my father died, and left me free, I was an old man. The miserable, miserly old——"

"Surely, surely——"

"Yes, yes, monsieur, I have forgiven him long ago, I am a good Christian; but you will understand my anger when I tell you, the day of his death, looking through his papers in the hope of finding enough to bury the old hypocrite, I found a memorandum of twenty thousand francs of rent!"

"He was rich, then?"

"Yes, very rich; for that wasn't all: he owned near Orleans a property leased for six thousand francs a year. He owned besides the house I now live in, where we lived together; and I, fool that I was, used to pay the rent every three months to the concierge!"

"Hard luck!" M. Daburon could not help saying.

"Yes! I was robbing myself of my own money! To crown the absurdity, he left a testament, wherein he declared he had no other aim in view, in thus acting, than my advantage. He wished, he said, to get me into good habits and economy, and keep me from being fleeced. And so, monsieur, I was at forty-five a rich man, who for twenty years could not accuse himself of having dropped a single sou. In short, he had speculated on my good heart to rob me of my life's happiness. Bah! it is enough to disgust the human race with filial piety."

M. Tabaret's anger, albeit very real, was so highly ludicrous in its effect upon his features and gesture that Daburon had much difficulty to restrain his laughter, although touched with pity at the recital.

"After all," he said, "this fortune ought to give you pleasure."

"No, monsieur, it came too late. What's the use of having the bread when one no longer has teeth for it?

"The best part of life was gone. I resigned my situation at the pawnbroker's, to make way for some other poor devil, and became a gentleman at large. At the end of a month, I was bored to death; and, to replace the interest in life I despaired of gaining, I resolved to give myself a passion, a hobby, a mania. I became a collector of books. You think

perhaps, monsieur, that to take an interest in books a man must have studied, must be learned ? "

" No, monsieur ; but he must have money. I am acquainted with an illustrious bibliomaniac who actually cannot read his own name."

" It is very possible, monsieur : but I could read ; and I read all the books I bought, and mine is an unique collection. It consists of all the works I could find, far or near, that told anything about the police. Memoirs, reports, discourses, letters—all were delightful to me ; and I devoured them as Don Quixote did the books of chivalry.

" Reading these adventures so exciting and so real, I became little by little attracted towards this mysterious power which from the obscurity of the Rue Jerusalem watches over and protects society from fraud and violence—that unseen hand that lifts the most impervious veil ; that invisible eye that sees through every plot ; that unknown intelligence that divines even the secrets of men's hearts, knows to a grain weight the worth of women's reputation and the price of men's integrity ; that universal confidant who keeps in her secret record the most terrible as well as the most shameful confessions !

" In reading the memoirs of celebrated police agents (more attractive matter to me than any novels) I became inspired by an enthusiastic admiration for those men, so untiring in pursuit, so fertile in expedient, who follow crime to its stronghold as relentlessly as the savages of Cooper pursue their enemies in the depths of the American forest. The desire seized me to become a wheel in this machine—a small assistance in the punishment of crime and the triumph of innocence. I have tried ; and I am proud to say, monsieur, I find I have not mistaken my vocation."

" Then this employment pleases you ? "

" I owe to it, monsieur, my liveliest moments. No more boredom ! Since I have abandoned the pursuit of old worm-eaten books for this to which I am equal, I am happy. I shrug my shoulders when I see a foolish fellow pay twenty-five francs for the right of hunting a hare. What a prize ! Give me the hunting of a man ! *That* calls the faculties into play, and the victory is not inglorious ! The game in my sport is worth the hunter. He has against him intelligence, force, and cunning. The arms are nearly equal. Ah, if people knew the excitement of these parties of hide

and seek which are played between the criminal and the detective, everybody would be wanting employment at the bureau of secret police. The misfortune is, that the art is being lost because fine crimes are rare. The race of strong criminals, fearless and ingenious, has given place to a mob of vulgar pickers and stealers, hardly worth hunting after—blunderers as well as cowards, who sign their names to their misdeeds, and even leave you their visiting-cards. There is no merit in catching them : their work examined, nothing remains but their arrest."

" It seems to me," said M. Daburon, smiling, " that our man isn't such a bungler."

" This case, monsieur, is an exception ; and I shall have the greater delight in tracing him : and I will trace him, though I should compromise myself in the pursuit. For I ought to confess, M. Daburon," added he, with a ludicrous embarrassment, " that I do not boast to my friends of my exploits, but conceal them as carefully as possible. They would shake hands with me less warmly if they knew that Tirauclair and Tabaret were one."

The crime became again the subject of conversation. It was agreed that, in the morning, Père Tabaret should instal himself at Bougival. By hard work he could examine all the peasants in the country in a week. On his side Daburon promised to keep him advised of the least evidence that transpired, and recall him, if by any accident he should procure the papers of the Widow Lerouge.

" To you, M. Tabaret," he said in conclusion, " I shall be always at home. If you have anything to speak of, do not hesitate to come at night as well as during the day. I rarely go abroad ; and you will always find me at home—Rue Jacob. When not in my office at the Palais de Justice, I shall leave orders for your admittance whenever you present yourself."

The train entered the station at this moment. M. Daburon, having called a hackney coach, offered a place to Père Tabaret. The old fellow declined.

" It is not worth while," replied he ; " for I live, as I have had the honour to tell you, Rue St. Lazare, two steps from here."

" Till to-morrow, then ! " said M. Daburon.

" Till to-morrow," replied Père Tabaret ; and he added, " We shall find him ! "

CHAPTER III

Père Tabaret's dwelling was in truth, as he said, not four minutes' walk from the railway terminus of St. Lazare. He was the owner of the property—a fine house, carefully kept, and which must have yielded a good revenue, although the rents on the quarter were not extravagant.

The house being much too large for the old fellow, he occupied only the ground floor—a suite of handsome apartments, well arranged and comfortably furnished, of which the principal ornament was his collection of books. He lived very simply from taste as well as habit, served by an old domestic to whom on great occasions the portress lent a helping hand.

Nothing in the house gave the slightest indication of the hobby of its proprietor. Besides, even the humblest agent of police would be expected to possess a degree of acuteness for which no one gave M. Tabaret credit. They mistook for incipient idiocy his continual absence of mind.

It is true that all who knew him remarked on the singularity of his habits. His constant expeditions had given to his proceedings an appearance at once eccentric and mysterious. Never was young libertine more irregular in his habits than this old man. He came or failed to come to his meals, ate it mattered not what at any hour. He went out at every hour of the day and night, often slept abroad, and even disappeared for weeks at a time. Then he received the strangest visitors—odd-looking men of suspicious appearance, and fellows of ill-favoured and sinister aspect.

This irregular way of life had robbed the old fellow of some consideration. Many believed they saw in him a shameless libertine, who dispensed his revenues in disreputable places of amusement. They exclaimed, " Isn't it a shame, a man of that age ? "

He was aware of these reports, and laughed at them. This did not, however, prevent many of his acquaintances from seeking his society and paying court to him. When invited out to dinner, he almost invariably refused.

He saw little of his tenants, with one exception, where he cultivated the greatest intimacy, so great indeed that he was almost as much at home in his neighbour's apartments as his own. This exception was made in favour of a widow

lady, who had for more than fifteen years occupied the third floor. She was called Madame Gerdy, and lived with her son Noel, whom she worshipped.

Noel Gerdy was a man of about thirty-three, and older in appearance, tall and well-made, with a noble and intelligent face, large black eyes, and black hair which curled naturally. An advocate, he passed for having great talent, and greater industry, and had already gained a certain amount of notoriety. An obstinate worker, cold and meditative, devoted to his profession, he affected, with some ostentation, perhaps a great rigidity of principle, and austerity of manners.

In Madame Gerdy's family, Père Tabaret almost believed himself included. He looked upon himself as a father, and upon Noel as a son. In spite of her fifty years, he had often thought of asking the hand of this charming widow, and was restrained less by the fear of a refusal than its consequences. To propose and be rejected would sever the existing relations, so pleasurable to him. However, he had in his will, which was deposited with his notary, constituted this young advocate his sole legatee ; with the sole condition of paying an annual prize of two thousand francs to the detective who during the year had brought to light the most obscure and mysterious crime.

Short as was the distance to his house, Père Tabaret was a good quarter of an hour in reaching it. On leaving the judge, his thoughts reverted to the scene of the murder ; and, so blinded was the old fellow to external objects, that the passers-by were obliged to push him aside in order to pursue their way : thus his progress was a slow one.

He repeated to himself for the fiftieth time the words of the Widow Lerouge, as reported by the dairy woman. " If I wished for anything more, I could have it."

" All is in that," murmured he. " The Widow Lerouge possessed some important secret, which persons rich and powerful had the strongest motives for concealing. This secret was her fortune ; by means of this she made her powerful friends sing to her tune. She has either threatened or wearied them, and they have silenced her for ever ! But of what nature was this secret, and how did she become possessed of it ? Might she not in her youth have been a servant in some great family, where she has seen, heard, or surprised something. What ? Evidently there is a woman

at the bottom. May she not have assisted her mistress in some intrigue? What more probable? And in that case the affair becomes complicated. Not only must the woman be found, but the lover; for it is the lover who has moved in this affair. It must be, or I am deceived, a noble personage. A man of inferior rank would have paid the assassin. This man has not hung back; he himself has struck, avoiding the mistake of an accomplice. He is a courageous man, full of audacity and coolness; for the crime has been admirably executed.

"The lover left nothing behind of a nature to compromise him seriously; but for me, Gevrol would have seen in the assassination the work of a robber, and overlooked the real motive for the crime! No," continued the good man, "it must be the issue of some love-affair or other. Time will show."

Père Tabaret mounted the steps in front of his house. The portress, seated in her *loge*, and chatting with her husband, saw him through the window by the light of the lamp which hung over the door.

"Look there!" said the porter, "here is the proprietor returned."

"So it seems," returned the portress. "His princess does not want him this evening. He looks troubled about something."

"It is positively indecent," said the porter, "for a man of his years to act in the manner he does. Oh, he's got softening of the brain. One of these fine mornings he will find his way to the lunatic asylum in a straight waistcoat."

"Look at him now!" interrupted the portress—"look at him now, in the open street!"

The old fellow had stopped at the extremity of the porch. He had taken off his hat, and, while talking to himself, gesticulated violently.

"No," said he to himself, "I haven't got the clue yet; but I am near it. I'm getting warm, but not quite there."

Admitted by the portress, he passed on to the door of his apartments, and rang the bell, forgetting that he had his latch-key in his pocket. His housekeeper came and opened it.

"Good evening, monsieur. Is it you, and at this hour?"

"Good evening, madame. And what of that?" demanded the old fellow.

"Do you know," said the servant, "that it is half-past

eight o'clock? I thought you were not coming back this evening. Have you dined?"

"No, not yet."

"Fortunately I have kept your dinner warm. You can sit down to table."

Père Tabaret seated himself, and was helped to soup; but, mounting his hobby-horse again, he forgot to eat, and remained arrested by an idea, his spoon in the air.

"He is certainly touched," thought Mannette. "Look at that stupid air. Who would act in such a manner who was in his senses?"

She struck him on the shoulder, bawling in his ear, as if he were deaf:

"You don't eat. Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes, yes," he answered, trying mechanically to escape the voice that sounded in his ears. "I am very hungry; for since morning I have been obliged——"

He interrupted himself, remaining with his mouth open, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"You have been obliged——?" repeated Mannette.

"Thunder!" cried he, raising his clenched hands towards the ceiling—"thunder of heaven! I have it now."

His movement was so violent and sudden that the housekeeper was alarmed, and retired to the further end of the room, near the door.

"Yes," continued he, "it is certain there is a child!" Mannette approached quickly.

"A child?" she asked in astonishment.

"Ah, so," cried he in a furious tone. "What are you doing there? Have you come to this that you pick up all my words? Do me the favour to get back to your kitchen, and stay there until I call you."

"He is going crazy!" thought Mannette, as she disappeared very quickly.

Père Tabaret returned to the table. The soup was completely cold; but he swallowed it in large spoonfuls without noticing it.

"Stupid!" said he to himself. "Why did I not think of it before? I am growing old; and my mind is less sharp than it used to be. But it's clear as day: everything points to it."

He rapped with his spoon upon the table: the servant reappeared.

"The roast," demanded he, "and leave me to myself."

" Yes," he continued, furiously carving a leg of Présalé mutton—" yes, there was a child ; and here is the history. The Widow Lerouge, when a young woman, was in the service of a great lady, immensely rich. Her husband, a sailor, probably had departed on a long voyage. The lady had a lover—found herself *enceinte*. She confided in the Widow Lerouge, and, with her assistance, accomplished a clandestine *accouchement*."

He called again.

" Mannette, the dessert, and get out ! "

Certainly such a master was unworthy of so excellent a cook as Mannette. He would have been puzzled to say what he had eaten for dinner, or even what he was eating at this moment ; it was a preserve of pears.

" But what," he murmured, " has become of the child ? Has it been murdered ? No ; for the Widow Lerouge, an accomplice in an infanticide, would be no longer formidable. The child has been given into the care of our widow, by whom it has been reared. They have been able to take the child away from her, but not the proofs of its birth and its existence. Here is the first opening. The father is the man of the fine carriage ; the mother is the lady who came with the handsome young man. Ha ! ha ! I can well believe the dear old dame wanted for nothing. She had a secret worth a ransom. But the old lady was extravagant ; her expenses and her demands have increased year by year. Poor soul ! She leaned upon the staff too heavily, and broke it. She threatened. They were frightened, and said, ' Let there be an end of this ! ' But who has charged himself with the commission ? The father ? No : he is too old. By Jupiter ! the son—the child himself ! He would save his mother, the brave boy ! He has slain the witness and burnt the proofs ! "

Mannette all this time, her ear to the keyhole, listened with all her might ; from time to time she gleaned a word, an oath, the noise of a blow upon the table ; but that was all.

" For certain," she thought, " his women are running in his head."

Her curiosity overcame her prudence. Hearing no more, she ventured to open the door a little way. The old fellow caught her in the very act.

" Monsieur wants his coffee ? " she stammered timidly.

" Yes, you may bring it to me," he answered.

He attempted to swallow his coffee at a gulp, but scalded himself so severely that the pain brought him suddenly from speculation to reality.

" Thunder ! " he grumbled : " but it is hot ! Devil take the case ! it has set me beside myself. They are right in the office, when they say I take too strong an interest in the investigations. Who but I could, by the sole exercise of observation and reason, have established the whole history of the outrage ? Certainly not Gevrol, poor man ! He must, if he has any professional feeling, be deeply humiliated. Shall I seek M. Daburon ? No, not yet. I must sift to the bottom all the particulars and arrange my ideas systematically before meeting him again. Upon the other hand, if I sit here alone, this business will keep me in a fever of speculation. My faith ! I will call upon Madame Gerdy : she has been ailing for some days. I will have a chat with Noel, and that will brighten me up a little."

He got up from the table, and took his hat and cane.

" Monsieur is going out ? " demanded Mannette.

" Yes."

" Monsieur will not return until late ? "

" Possibly."

" But monsieur will return ? "

" I do not know."

One minute later Père Tabaret rang at his friend Madame Gerdy's apartments.

Madame Gerdy lived in respectable style. She had a good income ; and her son's business, already large, had made it a fortune. She had few acquaintances, and, with the exception of one or two friends, occasionally invited to dinner, received no visitors. During the fifteen years that Père Tabaret came familiarly to the house, he had encountered only the curate of the parish, an old professor, and Madame Gerdy's brother, a colonel retired from service.

When these three visitors called upon the same evening, an event somewhat rare, they played at " Boston," or made a party at piquet. Noel, however, seldom remained in the salon, but shut himself up after dinner in his study, and immersed himself in his law papers. He was supposed to work far into the night. Often in winter his lamp was not extinguished before dawn.

Mother and son absolutely lived for one another, as all who knew them took pleasure in repeating.

They loved and honoured Noel for the care he bestowed upon his mother—for his more than filial devotion—for the sacrifices which all supposed he made in living at his age like an old man.

The neighbours were in the habit of contrasting the conduct of this exemplary young man with that of Père Tabaret, the incorrigible old rake, the gallant in the peruque.

As for Madame Gerdy, she saw nothing but her son in all the world. Her love had actually taken the form of worship. In Noel, she believed she saw united all the physical and moral perfections. To her he seemed of a superior order to the rest of humanity. If he spoke, she listened and was silent : his word was a command, his advice a decree of Providence. To care for her son, study his tastes, anticipate his wishes, was the sole aim of her life. Noel was her existence.

She was a mother.

" Is Madame Gerdy at home ? " demanded Père Tabaret of the young girl who opened the door ; and, without waiting for an answer, he walked into the room like a man assured that his presence cannot be inopportune, and ought to be agreeable.

A single lamp gave light to the salon, which was not in its accustomed order. The marble-top table, usually in the middle of the room, was rolled into a corner. Madame Gerdy's large armchair was near the window : a newspaper, all crumpled, lay before it on the carpet.

The old amateur took in the whole at a glance.

" Has any accident occurred ? " he demanded of the young girl.

" Do not speak to me, monsieur : we have had such a fright ! oh, what a fright ! "

" What was it ? speak quickly ! "

" You know that madame has been ailing for more than a month. She has eaten, I may say, almost nothing ; this morning, even, she said to me——"

" Well, well ! but this evening ? "

" After dinner madame came into the salon as usual. She sat down and took up one of M. Noel's newspapers. Scarcely had she begun to read, when she uttered a great cry—oh, a terrible cry, monsieur ! We ran into the salon, and found madame where she had fallen upon the carpet as if dead. M. Noel raised her in his arms, and carried her

into her chamber. I wanted to fetch a doctor ; but he said there was no need : he knew what was the matter with her."

" And how is she now ? "

" She has come to her senses ; that is to say, I suppose so ; for M. Noel made me leave the room. All that I do know is, that she kept talking all the time, and talking very loudly too ; for I heard her say—ah, monsieur, but it is all so very strange ! "

" What is strange ? "

" What I heard Madame Gerdy say to M. Noel. "

" Ah-ha ! my dear ! " sneered Père Tabaret ; " so you listen at keyholes, do you ? "

" No, monsieur ! no indeed, I swear to you ; but madame cried out like one lost. She said——"

" My girl," said Père Tabaret, " one never hears anything good through keyholes. Mannette can tell you as much."

The poor girl, thoroughly confused, sought to excuse herself.

" Enough, enough ! " said the good man. " Return to your work : you need not disturb M. Noel ; I can wait for him very well here."

And, satisfied with the reproof he had administered, he picked up the newspaper, and installed himself in the chimney-corner, placing the lamp so as to read with ease.

A minute had scarcely elapsed when he in his turn bounded in his chair, and uttered a cry of instinctive terror and surprise.

These were the first words that met his eye.

" A horrible crime has plunged the little village of La Jonchère into grief and consternation. A poor widow, named Lerouge, who enjoyed the general esteem and love of the community, has been assassinated in her own house. The police made the usual preliminary investigations; and, from the information we have been able to gather, we believe justice is already on the track of the authors of this dastardly crime."

" Thunder ! " cried Père Tabaret to himself, " can it be that Madame Gerdy—— ? "

The idea was but a gleam of lightning, dismissed as soon as formed ; he fell back into the armchair, and, raising his shoulders, murmured :

" This affair of Jonchère is driving me out of my senses !

I can think of nothing but this infernal Widow Lerouge. I see her now in everything."

In the meanwhile, an uncontrollable curiosity made him peruse the entire newspaper. He found nothing, with the exception of these lines, to justify or explain even the slightest emotion.

" It is an extremely singular coincidence, at the same time," thought the incorrigible police agent. Then, remarking that the newspaper was slightly torn at the lower part, and crushed, as if by a convulsive grasp, he repeated :

" It is strange ! "

At this moment the door of Madame Gerdy's room opened, and Noel appeared on the threshold.

Without doubt the accident to his mother had greatly excited him ; for he was very pale, and his countenance, ordinarily so calm, wore an expression of profound sorrow. He appeared surprised to see Père Tabaret.

" Ah, my dear Noel ! " cried the old fellow. " How is your mother ? "

" Madame Gerdy is as well as can be expected."

" Madame Gerdy ! " repeated the old fellow, with an air of astonishment ; but he continued, " It is plain you have been seriously alarmed."

" In truth," replied the advocate, seating himself, " I have experienced a rude shock."

Noel was making visibly the greatest efforts to appear calm, to listen to the old fellow, and to answer him. Père Tabaret, as much disquieted on his side, perceived nothing.

" At least, my dear boy," said he, " tell me how this happened ? "

The young man hesitated a moment, as if consulting with himself. No doubt he was unprepared for this point-blank question, and knew not what answer to make ; at last he replied :

" Madame Gerdy has suffered a severe shock in learning from a paragraph in this newspaper that a woman in whom she takes a strong interest has been murdered."

" Ah ! " cried Père Tabaret.

The old fellow was in a fever of embarrassment. He wanted to question Noel, but was restrained by the fear of revealing the secret of his association with the police. Indeed, he had almost betrayed himself by the eagerness with which he exclaimed :

" What ! your mother knew the Widow Lerouge ? "

By an effort he restrained himself, and with difficulty dissembled his satisfaction ; for he was delighted to find himself so unexpectedly on the trace of the antecedents of the victim of La Jonchère.

" She was," continued Noel, " the slave of Madame Gerdy, devoted to her body and soul ! She would have thrown herself in the fire at a sign from her hand."

" Then you, my dear friend, you knew this honest woman ? "

" I have not seen her for a long time," replied Noel ; " but I knew her well ; I ought even to say I loved her tenderly. She was my nurse."

" She, this woman ? " stammered Père Tabaret.

This time he was thunderstruck. The Widow Lerouge Noel's nurse ? He was playing with fortune. Providence had evidently chosen him for its instrument, and was leading him by the hand. He was about to obtain all the information, in one half-hour, which he had almost despaired of ever procuring. He remained seated before Noel stunned and speechless. At length he remembered that, unless he wanted to compromise himself, he must say something.

" It is a great misfortune," murmured he.

" For Madame Gerdy, I don't know ; but, for me, it is a tragedy ! I am struck to the heart by the blow which has slain this poor woman. Her death, M. Tabaret, has crushed my dreams of the future, and overthrown my most cherished hopes. I have to perform a solemn duty—to avenge myself for cruel outrages. Her death breaks the weapon in my hands, and reduces me to despair, to impotence. Alas ! I am indeed unfortunate."

" You unfortunate ? " cried Père Tabaret, singularly affected by the sadness of his dear Noel. " In heaven's name, what has happened to you ? "

" I suffer," murmured the advocate, " not only from injustice that can never be repaired, but from dread of calumny that cannot be repudiated. I am defenceless. I shall be accused of inventing falsehood, of being an ambitious intriguer, having no regard for truth, no scruples of conscience."

Père Tabaret was puzzled. What connection could possibly exist between Noel's honour and the assassination at Jonchère ? His brain was in a whirl. A thousand troubled

and confused ideas jostled one another in inextricable confusion.

" Come, come, Noel," said he, " pull yourself together. Calumny threatens you ? Nonsense ! Haven't you friends ? Am I not here ? Have confidence in me. It will be strange, indeed, if between us two——"

The advocate started to his feet, inflamed by a sudden resolution.

" Yes," interrupted he, " you shall know the secret that is stifling me. The rôle I have imposed upon myself irritates and confounds me. I have need of a friend to console, a counsellor to advise me ; for one is a bad judge of his own cause ; and this crime has plunged me into an abyss of hesitation."

" You know," replied Père Tabaret, " that I regard you as a son. Speak to me, my dear Noel, as if I were indeed your father."

" Know then," commenced the advocate—" but, no, not here : what I have to say must not be overheard. Let us go into my study."

CHAPTER IV

When Noel and Père Tabaret were seated face to face in the small apartment devoted to Noel's business, and the door had been carefully locked, the old fellow began to feel uneasy.

" If your mother should require anything——" he said.

" If Madame Gerdy rings," replied the young man, " the servant will attend to her wants."

This indifference, this coldness confounded Père Tabaret, accustomed as he was to the affection between mother and son.

" For heaven's sake, Noel," said he, " calm yourself. Do not allow yourself to be overcome by a feeling of irritation. You have, I see, some little pique against your mother, which will be forgotten to-morrow. Don't speak of her in this icy tone ; but tell me what you mean by calling her Madame Gerdy ? "

" What I mean ? " replied the advocate in a hollow tone. " What I mean ? "

He quitted his armchair, took several strides across the floor of the little chamber, returned to his place near the old fellow, and said :

" Because, M. Tabaret, Madame Gerdy is not my mother ! "

This sentence fell like a blow of a heavy club on the head of the old man : he was paralysed.

" Oh ! " he said, in the tone one assumes when rejecting an absurd proposition, " do you realise what you say, Noel ? Is it credible ? Is it probable ? "

" It is improbable," replied Noel, with peculiar emphasis : " it is incredible, if you will ; but it is true. For thirty-three years, ever since my birth, this woman has played a most marvellous and unworthy comedy, to ennoble and enrich her son—for she has a son—and to despoil, to plunder me ! "

" My dear boy ! " exclaimed Père Tabaret, who in the background of the picture presented by this singular revelation saw again the phantom of the murdered Widow Lerouge.

But Noel heard not, and seemed hardly in a state to hear. The young man, usually so cold, so self-contained, could not control his anger. At the sound of his own voice, he became animated, as a good horse might at the jingling of its harness.

" Was ever man," continued he, " more cruelly deceived, more miserably duped, than I have been—I who have so loved this woman ? How I have sought for evidences of affection to lavish on her, who was sacrificing me to her own selfish ambition for her son ! How she has laughed at me ! Her infamy dates from the moment when for the first time she took me on her knees ; and, until these few days past, she has sustained without faltering her execrable rôle : her love for me, hypocrisy ! her devotion falsehood ! And how I have worshipped her ! Ah ! why can I not recall the innocent kisses of my childhood, the devotion of my youth, the sacrifices of my manhood, given in exchange for her false kisses ? And for what was all this heroism of deception, this caution, this duplicity ? To betray me, more securely to despoil me ; to rob me ; to give to her illegitimate offspring all that lawfully appertained to me—a noble name, a princely inheritance ! "

" We are hot now ! " thought Père Tabaret, who was fast relapsing into the *collaborateur* of M. Gevrol ; then aloud he said :

" This is terribly serious, my dear Noel. To credit what you have said, we must believe Madame Gerdy possessed of

an amount of audacity and ability rarely united in one individual. She must have been assisted, advised, compelled perhaps. Who have been her accomplices ? She could never have accomplished this herself ; her husband perhaps himself ? "

" Her husband ! " interrupted Noel, with a bitter laugh. " Ah ! you believed her to be a widow. Pshaw ! She never had a husband. Père Gerdy never had an existence. I am illegitimate, my dear Tabaret, thrice base born—Noel, son of a *femme couvert* and an unknown father ! "

" Ah ! " cried the old fellow ; " this, then, is the reason for your marriage with Mademoiselle Levernois being delayed these four years ? "

" Yes, my friend, that was the cause. And what misfortunes might have been averted by this marriage with a young girl whom I love ! Had I wedded her before making this abominable discovery, I should not have wasted all my affection on her whom I called my mother. When she told me I was not the son of this imaginary individual, this M. Gerdy, she wept, she accused herself, she seemed ready to die of grief and shame ; and I, poor fool ! dry her tears, excuse her to her own eyes ! No, she had no husband : such women have no husbands. She was the Count de Commarin's mistress ; and, on the day when he quitted her, he threw to her three hundred thousand francs, the price of her degradation ! "

Noel would have continued to pour forth these furious denunciations ; but his volubility was arrested by Tabaret. He felt he was coming to a history in all points similar to that which he had imagined ; and his impatience to gratify his vanity, in discovering how nearly he had divined the facts, made him almost forget to express any sympathy for his friend's misfortunes.

" My dear boy," said he, " let us not digress. You ask me for advice ; and I am perhaps the best adviser you could have chosen. Come, then, to the point. How have you learned this ? Have you proofs of what you state ? Where are they ? "

The decided tone of the old fellow would no doubt have awakened Noel's attention at any other time ; but he was off his guard : he had not leisure to stop or to reflect. He answered promptly :

" I have known the truth for three weeks. I made the

discovery by chance. I have important moral proofs ; but they are mere presumptive evidence. A word from the Widow Lerouge, one single word, would have rendered them decisive. This word she cannot pronounce, since they have killed her ; but she has said it to me. Of what avail ? Now Madame Gerdy will deny all. I know her ; with her head on the block, she will deny it. My father doubtless will turn against me. I am myself morally convinced. I *was* strong in evidence ; but this crime makes my certainty useless, utterly destroys my proofs ! "

" Explain it all to me," replied Père Tabaret after a pause —" all you understand. We, the old, are sometimes able to give good advice ; and I am willing to advise you."

" Three weeks ago," commenced Noel, " searching for some old documents, I opened Madame Gerdy's *secrétaire*. Accidentally I overturned a drawer : some papers tumbled out, amongst which were a packet of letters, which fell right into my hand. A mechanical impulse, which I cannot explain, prompted me to untie the string, and read one of the letters."

" You did wrong," remarked Père Tabaret.

" Be it so. I read. At the end of ten lines, I was convinced that this correspondence was my father's, whose name, Madame Gerdy, in spite of my prayers, had always hidden from me. You can understand my emotion. I carried off the packet, shut myself up in this room, and devoured the letters from beginning to end."

" And you have been cruelly punished, my poor boy ! "

" It is true ; but who in my position could have resisted ? These letters have given me pain ; but they afford the proof of what I have told you."

" And you have preserved the letters ? "

" I have them here ; and, that you may understand the case in which I have requested your advice, I am going to read them to you."

The advocate opened one of the drawers of his bureau, pressed an imperceptible spring, and a hidden receptacle appeared in the back of the upper tablette, from which he drew out a bundle of letters.

" You understand, my friend," said he, " that I shall spare you all insignificant details, which, however, have their own weight. I am only going to take up the important facts, which treat directly of the affair."

Père Tabaret nestled in his armchair, burning with the fever of curiosity, his face expressing the most ardent attention.

After a selection, which he was some time in making, the advocate opened a letter, and commenced his reading in a voice which trembled, in spite of his efforts to render it calm.

"My Valerie, well beloved——

"Valerie," he said, "you understand, is Madame Gerdy."

"I know, I know. Do not interrupt yourself."

Noel continued :

"My Valerie, well beloved,—This is a happy day. This morning I received your welcome letter. I have covered it with kisses. I have read it a hundred times ; and now it has gone to join the others here upon my heart. This letter fills me with transport. You were not deceived. Heaven has blessed our loves ; and we shall have a son.

"I shall have a son, the living image of my adored Valerie ! Oh ! why are we parted at a time like this ? Why have I not the wings of a bird, that I might fly to thee, beloved of my soul, and mingle our tears of joy and thankfulness ? Ah ! never as at this moment have I cursed the fatal union imposed upon me by an inexorable family, whose cruelty my prayers and tears could not soften. I cannot restrain myself from hating this woman who bears my name, in spite of me, innocent victim though she is of the barbarity of our parents. And, to fill up the measure of sorrow, she is also soon to make me a father. What words can paint my sorrow when I compare the fortunes of these two children ?

"One, son of the object of my tenderest love, shall have neither father, family, nor name, since an inexorable law forbids me to legitimatise him. While the other, the son of my detested spouse, by the sole fact of his birth shall be rich, honoured, noble, surrounded by devotion and homage, with a great position in the world. I cannot endure the thought of this terrible injustice ! Who can imagine a way to repair it ? I cannot tell now ; but be sure I shall find a way. It is to him, the most desired, most cherished, most beloved, that the best fortune should come ; and come to him it shall : I swear it."

"What is that letter dated ? " demanded Père Tabaret.

"See," replied Noel.

He handed the letter to the old fellow, who read :

"Venice, December 1828."

" You perceive," said the advocate, " all the importance of this first letter : it is a brief statement of the facts. My father, married in spite of himself, adores his mistress and detests his wife. Nor are his feelings towards the children at all concealed. In fact, we can plainly perceive, peeping forth, the germ of the idea which afterwards he matured and carried into execution, in defiance of all law human or divine ! "

He was gradually falling into his professional manner, as if pleading the cause before the tribunals. Père Tabaret again interrupted him.

" There is no explanation necessary ; the letter is explicit enough. I am not an adept in such matters as a grand juror ; but I understand admirably so far."

" I pass several letters," continued Noel, " and I come to this one of January 23, 1829. It is very long, and filled with matters altogether foreign to the subject which now interests us. However, I find therein two passages, which attest the slow but steady and determinate growth of the idea suggested in the first letter.

" The destinies, more powerful than my will, chain me here ; but my soul is ever near to thee, my adored Valerie ! Without ceasing, my thoughts rest upon the unspeakable happiness in store for us.

" I skip," said Noel, " several pages of passionate rhapsody, to stop at these lines at the end.

" My aversion to the countess increases daily. Unfortunate woman ! I hate and at the same time pity her. She seems to divine the reason for my sadness, my coldness. By her timid submission and unalterable sweetness, she seems to seek pardon for her share in our unhappy union. Sacrificed creature ! She also may have given her heart to another, before being fettered to a husband who can never look upon her with a husband's love. Your good heart will pardon me this pity.

" That countess was my mother," cried the advocate in a trembling voice. " And he demands pardon for the pity she inspires ! Poor lady ! "

He covered his eyes with his hand, as if forcing back his tears, and added in a low tone :

" She is dead ! "

In spite of his impatience, Père Tabaret dared not utter a word. He resented keenly the profound sorrow of his

friend. After a silence, which almost maddened him, Noel raised his head, and returned to the letters.

" All the letters which follow," said he, " carry traces of the preoccupation of my father's mind on the subject of his illegitimate son. I lay them, however, aside, and take up this written from Rome, March 5, 1829.

" My son—our son, my most constant, my only care—how to secure for him the position in the future of which I dream ? The nobles of former days had not these vulgar obstacles to their wishes to contend with. In old time, a word from the king would have ennobled my son, and given him a place in the world. To-day, the king who governs with difficulty his disaffected subjects can do less than nothing. Nobility has lost its rights, and the lords of France are as powerless to transgress the laws as the meanest of their vassals.

" Lower down I find :

" My heart loves to picture to itself the form and features of our son. He will have the soul, the mind, the beauty, all the fascinations of his mother. He will inherit from his father the pride, the valour, the sentiments of his noble and ancient race. What will be the other ? I tremble to think of it.

" The monster ! That is me ! " cried the advocate, with intense rage. " ' Whilst the other——' But let us leave this part of the subject, these preliminaries to an outrageous action. I only desire by these to show the aberration of my father's reason under the influence of his passion. We shall soon be at the end."

Père Tabaret was astonished at the strength of this passion, long since burnt out, of which Noel was raking up the dead ashes. Perhaps he felt all the more keenly the force of those passionate expressions of devotion because they reminded him of his own lost youth. He understood how irresistible must have been the force of such a love ; and he trembled to speculate as to the result.

" Here," said Noel, " is another ; not one of those interminable epistles from which I have read you fragments, but a simple note. It is dated from Venice at the beginning of May ; it is short and decisive.

" Dear Valerie,—Thy response is more favourable than I dared to hope for. The project I have conceived is now practicable. I begin to feel the approach of calmness and security. Your son shall bear my name. I shall not be obliged to separate myself

from him. He shall be reared near me, in my house, under my eyes, on my knees, in my arms. Shall I have strength to bear this excess of happiness?

"I set out to-morrow for Naples, from whence I shall write to you at length; although, whatever may happen, though I should sacrifice the important interests confided to me, I shall be in Paris at the solemn hour. My presence will double your courage; my love shall diminish thy sufferings.

"Pardon me for interrupting you, Noel," said Père Tabaret, "do you know what grave affairs detained your father abroad?"

"My father," replied the advocate, "was, in spite of his youth, one of the friends, one of the confidants, of Charles X.; and he had been charged by him with a secret mission to Italy. My father is the Count Rheteau de Commarin."

"Whew!" exclaimed the old fellow; and between his teeth, the better to engrave the name upon his memory, he repeated several times, "Rheteau de Commarin."

Noel held his peace. Having controlled his resentment, he seemed buried in reflection, as if seeking the means of executing his unalterable determination to repair the wrong he had sustained.

"In the middle of the month of May," continued he, "my father writes again, this time from Naples. Does it not appear incredible that a man of prudence, sense, a dignified diplomatist, a gentleman, should dare, even in the eagerness of insensate passion, to confide to paper this most monstrous project? Listen!

"My Adored,—Germain, my faithful *valet de chambre*, will hand you this letter. I have despatched him to Normandy, charged with a commission of the most delicate nature. He is one of those servitors who may be trusted implicitly.

"The time has come when you must learn the nature of my project touching our son. In three weeks, at the latest, I shall be in Paris.

"Here is what I have resolved.

"The two infants will be entrusted to two nurses of Normandy, where my estates are situated. One of these women, selected and instructed by Germain, will be in our interests; to her charge, my Valerie, our child is to be confided. These two women shall leave Paris the same day, Germain accompanying her who has the son of the countess.

"An accident, arranged in advance, will compel these two women to pass one night on the road. Another chance, brought

about by Germain, will force them to sleep in the same inn—in the same chamber !

" During the night, the nurse entrusted with your child will change the infants in their cradles.

" I have foreseen and arranged everything, even as I now explain it to you. Every precaution has been taken to prevent our secret from escaping. Germain is charged to procure, while in Paris, a cradle and clothing for your infant precisely similar to that of the countess's. Assist him with your advice.

" Your maternal heart, sweet Valerie, may bleed at thought of being deprived of your infant. Console yourself for the loss of his innocent caresses by dreaming of the station secured to him by your sacrifice. What excess of maternal tenderness can serve him as powerfully as this separation ? As to the other, I know your tenderness of heart. You will love him for his father's sake ; and the affection you bestow on him will prove your devotion to me. And he will have nothing to complain of. Knowing nothing, he shall have nothing to regret ; and all that money and influence can secure, in his position, he shall have.

" Do not argue with me that this attempt is criminal. No, my well beloved, no. The success of our plan depends upon so many coincidences, independent of our will, that should they unite, we may assure ourselves the hand of Providence favours our design. If success crowns our wishes, it will be because heaven has decreed it.

" I have hope ! "

" Just what I thought," murmured Père Tabaret.

" And the wretched man," cried Noel, " dares to invoke the aid of Providence ! He would make heaven his accomplice ! "

" But your mother," demanded the old fellow—" pardon, I would say Madame Gerdy—how did she receive this proposition ? "

" She appears to have rejected it, at first, for here are twenty pages of eloquent persuasion from the count, urging her to agree to it. Oh, this woman ! "

" My son," said Père Tabaret softly, " let us not be unjust. Why direct all your resentment against Madame Gerdy ? To me, the count seems far more deserving of your anger."

" True," interrupted Noel, with a certain degree of violence—" true, the count is culpable. He is the author of an infamous conspiracy ; yet I am not inspired by a sense of hatred against him. He has committed a crime, but has passion to excuse it. Moreover, he has not deceived me every hour of my life, by enacting a lie, as this miserable woman has, for thirty years. And, more than all, his punishment

has been so cruel that I can even now pardon the injury he has done me, and weep for the suffering it has entailed."

"Ah! he has been punished?" interrogated the old fellow.

"Yes, fearfully; how you shall learn. But allow me to continue. Towards the end of May, or, more probably, during the first days of June, the count must have arrived in Paris; for the correspondence ceases. It would seem that, after his meeting with Madame Gerdy, the final arrangements of the conspiracy were delayed by some obstacle. Here is a note, relieving all uncertainty on the subject. On the day it was written, the count was on service at the Tuileries, and unable to leave his post. He has written it even in the king's cabinet, on the king's paper; see the royal arms! The bargain has been concluded; the woman who has consented to become the instrument of his project is in Paris, of which he acquaints his mistress.

"Dear Valerie,—Germain announces to me the arrival of your son's nurse—your son, *our* son. She will present herself at your house during the day. She is to be depended upon. A magnificent recompense is the price of her discretion. She has been given to understand that you are ignorant of the proposed exchange of children; therefore say nothing to her that may undeceive her on that point. I wish to charge myself with the sole responsibility of the deed. It is the most prudent course. This woman is of Normandy. She was born on our lands and in some sort in our house. Her husband is an honest mariner. Her name is Claudine Lerouge.

"Be of good courage, my love! I am exacting from you the greatest sacrifice that can be made by woman; and I appreciate the devotion that forgoes a mother's happiness for thy lover's sake. There is no longer a doubt that heaven is protecting us. Hereafter everything depends upon our address, our prudence. I feel that we shall succeed!"

On one point, at least, Père Tabaret was sufficiently enlightened. The researches into the past life of the Widow Lerouge were anticipated. He could not restrain an exclamation, "At last!" of satisfaction, which fortunately escaped Noel.

"This note," said the advocate, "closes the Count de Commarin's correspondence."

"What!" exclaimed the old fellow, "you are in possession of nothing more?"

" I have yet ten lines, written many years later, which certainly have some weight, but, after all, offer only moral proof."

" What a misfortune ! " murmured Père Tabaret. Noel replaced on his bureau the letters which were in his hand, and, turning towards his old friend, looked at him steadily.

" Suppose," he said slowly, and emphasising every syllable—" suppose that all my sources of information end here. Admit, for a moment, that I know nothing more than you do now. What is your advice ? "

Père Tabaret paused some minutes before answering ; he was weighing the probabilities resulting from the count's letters.

" For my own part," said he at length, " I believe on my soul you are not the son of Madame Gerdy."

" And you believe rightly ! " answered the advocate forcibly. " You think, do you not, that, after reading these letters, I ought to have seen and questioned Claudine ? You will say this poor woman who nursed me must have loved me ; that she must have suffered some remorse for her part in the horrible injustice of which I was the victim ? Well, I have seen her. I have questioned her ; and she has confessed all. She was only too glad to do so. The thought of her complicity tormented her. It was a weight of guilt too heavy for her age to bear ; and she told me all. The count's scheme, simply and yet ingeniously conceived, succeeded without any effort ; and I, when but three days old, was thus betrayed, despoiled, and disinherited by my unnatural father and his unworthy mistress. Poor Claudine ! remorse was dragging her to the grave ; and she promised me, with eagerness, her testimony on the day I should reclaim my rights."

" And she has gone, carrying her secret with her," murmured the old fellow in a tone of regret.

" I have yet," said Noel, " one hope. Claudine had in her possession several letters, written subsequently—some by the count, some by Madame Gerdy—letters at once imprudent and explicit. They can be, without question, recovered ; and their evidence will be decisive. I have had them in my hands : I have read them. Claudine would have given them to me ; but, fool that I was, I did not take them."

The little hope that existed in that quarter no one knew better than Père Tabaret. To gain possession of those very

letters, the crime at Jonchère had been committed. The assassin had found and burned them, with the other papers, in the little stove. The old detective was master of the situation.

" Knowing your affairs, my dear boy, almost as thoroughly as my own," said the old fellow after another pause, " I am surprised the count should have forgotten the promises he made in his letters to Madame Gerdy, of promoting your fortune."

" He seems never to have remembered them ! "

" That," cried Tabaret indignantly, " is even more infamous than all the rest ! "

" Do not accuse my father," answered Noel gravely ; " his *liaison* with Madame Gerdy ceased long ago. I have a faint recollection of a distinguished-looking man who came to see me at school. I am now persuaded it was the count. But the rupture came."

" Naturally," said Père Tabaret. " A fine gentleman ! "

" Suspend your judgment," interrupted the advocate. " M. de Commarin had good reason ; his mistress deceived him. He discovered her perfidy, and cast her off with just indignation. The ten lines of which I have spoken were written then."

Noel searched a considerable time among the papers scattered upon the table, and at length selected a letter more faded and creased than the others. Judging from its appearance of having been often folded and unfolded, it had been read over and over many times ; the writing was almost effaced in many places.

" In this," said he in a bitter tone, " Madame Gerdy is no longer ' adored Valerie.' "

"A cruel friend has, like a true friend, opened my eyes. I doubted him, believing in you : but you have been watched ; and to-day, unhappily, I can doubt no more. You, Valerie—you to whom I have given more than my life—you have deceived me, and have been deceiving me long. Unhappy man that I am, I can no longer be certain that I am the father of your child."

" But this letter is a proof," cried Père Tabaret—" a proof that cannot be disputed. Of what importance to the count would be a doubt of his paternity ? Had he not sacrificed his legitimate to his natural son ? Yes, you have said truly, my dear Noel, his punishment has been severe."

" Madame Gerdy," continued Noel, " attempted to

justify herself. She wrote to the count ; but he returned her letters unopened. She tried to see him, but in vain : he would not grant her an interview. She knew that all was over when the count's steward brought her a legal settlement of fifteen thousand francs a year. Her son had taken my place ; and his mother had ruined me ! "

A light knock at the door of the study interrupted their conversation.

" Who is there ? " demanded Noel without stirring.

" Monsieur," answered the servant from outside the door, " madame wishes to speak to you."

The advocate appeared to hesitate.

" Go, my son," advised Père Tabaret ; " do not be merciless."

Noel rose with reluctance, and passed into Madame Gerdy's sleeping-apartment.

" Poor boy ! " thought Père Tabaret when left alone. " What a fatal discovery ! and how he must feel it ! Noble young man ! Brave, honest heart ! In his innocent simplicity, he sees not from whence the blow has fallen. By good fortune, I am not so blind. I can see for him ; and, when he despairs of justice, I am confident of obtaining it. Thanks to his information, I can see it all now. A child's intelligence might now divine whose hand struck the blow that silenced the important witness. How singular that he should assist the discovery of this crime without knowing it ! . . . How shall I proceed ? Ah, if I could have one of those letters for four and twenty hours. He probably has counted them. I dare not ask for one ; I would be compelled to acknowledge my connection with the police. Better run the risk, and take one, no matter which, that I may verify the writing."

Père Tabaret had hardly thrust one of the letters into the depths of one of his capacious pockets, when the advocate returned.

He was one of those men of strongly formed character whose self-control never deserts them. He was long accustomed to dissimulation, that indispensable armour of the ambitious.

Nothing in his manner betrayed what had taken place between Madame Gerdy and himself. He was absolutely as calm as, when seated in his armchair, he listened to the interminable nothings of his clients.

" Well," demanded Père Tabaret, " how is she now ? "

" Worse," answered Noel : " she is delirious. She just now assailed me with the most ghastly accusations, upbraiding me as the vilest of mankind. I am certain she is out of her senses."

" Or losing them," murmured Père Tabaret ; " and I think you ought to call in a physician."

" I am going in search of one," answered Noel.

The advocate resumed his seat before his bureau, and rearranged, according to their dates, the scattered letters. He seemed to have forgotten that he was wanting advice from his old friend ; nor did he appear desirous of renewing the conversation. This was the last thing in the world Père Tabaret desired.

" The more I think over your history, my dear Noel," he commenced, " the more I am bewildered. I do not know what resolution I should adopt, were I in your place."

" Yes," answered the advocate, " it's a situation that might well perplex more profound minds than yours."

The amateur repressed with difficulty the smile which for an instant appeared upon his lips.

" I confess it humbly," said he, taking pleasure in assuming an air of innocence. " But have you done anything yet ? Your first move should have been to demand an explanation of Madame Gerdy."

Noel made a startled movement, which was unnoticed by Père Tabaret, preoccupied as he was in trying to give the turn he desired to the conversation.

" It was by that," answered Noel, " I began."

" Well, what did she say ? "

" What could she say ? Wasn't she overwhelmed by the discovery ? "

" What ! didn't she attempt to justify herself ? "

" Oh, yes," sneered Noel, " she attempted ; she is accustomed to attempt the impossible, of course. She pretended to explain the correspondence. She told me I don't know how many absurd falsehoods."

The advocate finished gathering up his letters, without seeming to perceive the abstraction, tied them carefully, and replaced them in the secret drawer.

" Yes," continued he, rising and shutting up his bureau, as if trying by the movement to calm his anger—" yes, she attempted to make me believe the exchange had never taken

place—no easy matter, considering the proofs I hold. This is the reason for her sickness. The idea that her son, whom she adores, should be obliged to restore to me the name and fortune of which he robbed me broke her heart. She could see me suffer the most cruel privations ; but she could not bear the thought of her son's displacement. Rather than I should hurt a hair of his head, she'd consign me to the bottomless pit."

" She has probably told the count of your discovery," said Père Tabaret, pursuing his idea.

" Hardly ; for the count has been absent from Paris more than a month, and isn't expected to return until the end of the week."

" How do you know that ? "

" I called at the house, as I wished to see and speak with him."

" You ? "

" Yes. Do you think I shall not reclaim my own ? Do you imagine that I am the man to be robbed, spoiled, and betrayed with impunity ? No, I have rights ; and I shall make them good. What consideration withholds me from lifting up my voice and proclaiming my wrongs ? I shall claim my rights. Do you think that surprising ? "

" No, certainly, my friend ; then you have visited M. de Commarin's house ? "

" Oh, I did not adopt this resolution immediately," continued Noel. " My discovery made me at first almost lose my senses. At one moment, my fury blinded me ; the next, my courage deserted me. I would, and I would not. I was undecided, uncertain, wild. The scandal that must be occasioned by the publicity of such an affair terrified me. I longed to recover—I *will* recover my name ; but I would at the same time preserve that noble name from stain. I would, if possible, find a means of conciliating all parties concerned, without publicity and without scandal."

" You decided ? "

" Yes, after a struggle of a fortnight—a fortnight of torture, of anguish ! Ah ! what I suffered in that time ! I neglected my business, being unable to fix my mind upon any kind of work. During the day I tried by incessant action to fatigue my body, that at night I might find forgetfulness in sleep. Vain hope : since I found those ill-omened letters I have not slept an hour."

From time to time, Père Tabaret silently consulted his watch.

" M. Daburon will be asleep," thought he.

" One morning," continued Noel, " after a night of rage, I determined to end all uncertainty. I was in that desperate state of mind in which the gambler, after successive losses, throws upon the board his last remaining coin. I called a carriage, and, with a beating heart, gave the order, ' To the Hotel de Commarin, Faubourg St. Germain.' "

The old detective allowed a sigh of impatience to escape him.

" It is one of the most magnificent houses in Paris," continued Noel—almost a palace. Right and left of the vast courtyard are the stables, where twenty splendid horses are standing in reserve for common use. At the back rises the grand façade of the main building, majestic and severe, with its sculptured pediment, its noble portico, and its double flight of marble steps. Behind the house extends a large garden, or rather a park, shaded by the oldest trees, perhaps, in Paris."

This enthusiastic description sorely tested Père Tabaret's patience ; but he did not venture to interrupt Noel by a question. An indiscreet word might betray him, and reveal his relation with the Bureau of Investigation.

" Standing before the dwelling of my ancestors," continued Noel, " you cannot imagine the excess of my emotion. Here, said I, is the house in which I was born. This is the home in which I should have been reared ; and, above all, this is the spot where I should reign to-day, whereon I stand an outcast and a stranger, devoured by the sad and bitter memories of which banished men have died. I compared my brother's brilliant destinies with my sad and laborious career ; and my indignation well nigh overmastered reason. The mad impulse stirred me to force the doors, to rush into the grand salon, and drive out the intruder—the son of Madame Gerdy—who has taken the place of the son of the Countess de Commarin ! Out usurper, out of this. I am the master here. The propriety of legal means at once recurred to my distracted mind, however, and restrained me. Once more I stood before the habitation of my fathers. How I love its old sculptures, its grand old trees, its shaded walks, worn by the feet of my poor mother ! I love all, even to the proud escutcheon, frowning above the principal doorway,

flinging its defiance to the theories of this age of levellers."

This last phrase conflicted so directly with the code of opinions habitual to Noel that Père Tabaret was obliged to turn aside, to conceal his amusement.

"Poor soul!" he thought; "he is already the grand seigneur."

"On presenting myself," continued the advocate, "I demanded to see the Count de Commarin. A Swiss porter, in grand livery, answered, the count was travelling, but that the viscount was at home. This ran counter to my designs; but I was embarked; so I insisted on speaking to the son in default of the father. The Swiss porter stared at me with astonishment. He had evidently seen me alight from a hired carriage, and so deliberated for some moments as to whether I was not too insignificant a person to have the honour of being admitted to visit the viscount."

"But tell me, have you seen him?" asked Père Tabaret, unable to restrain his impatience.

"Of course, immediately," replied the advocate in a tone of bitter raillery. "Could the examination, think you, result otherwise than in my favour? No. My white cravat and black costume produced their natural effect. The Swiss porter entrusted me to the guidance of a *chasseur* with a plumed hat, who, leading me across the court to a superb vestibule, transferred me to the care of a lackey; who, in company with five or six others, was lolling upon a bench. This fine gentleman led me up a spacious staircase, wide enough for a carriage to ascend, and preceded me along an extensive picture gallery, guided me across a vast apartment, of which the furniture was shrouded in sombre coverings, and finally delivered me into the hands of the *valet de chambre* of Albert de Commarin; that is to say, the man who bears my name."

"I understand, I understand."

"I had passed an inspection; now I had to undergo an examination. M. Albert's valet desired to be informed who I was, whence I came, and what I wanted, what was my profession, and all the rest. I answered simply, that I was unknown to the viscount; but it was absolutely necessary I should converse with him for five minutes upon an affair of the most urgent nature. I waited more than a quarter of an hour, when he reappeared. His master had graciously deigned to receive me."

It was easy to perceive that his reception rankled in the advocate's breast. He could not forgive Albert his lackeys and his *valet de chambre*. He forgot the words of the illustrious duke, who said, " I pay my valets for being insolent, to save myself the trouble." Père Tabaret was a little surprised at his young friend's bitterness, in speaking of these trivial details.

" Can it be true," thought he, " that the arrogance of lackeys is the secret of the people's hatred of the aristocracy ? "

" I was ushered into a small salon," continued Noel, " simply furnished, the only ornaments of which were weapons. These, ranged against the walls, were of all times and countries. Never have I seen in so small a space so many muskets, arquebusses, pistols, swords, sabres, and foils : one might have imagined himself in the arsenal of a *maître d'armes*."

The weapon used by the Widow Lerouge's assassin naturally recurred to the old fellow's memory.

" The viscount," continued Noel, speaking slowly, " was half lying on the divan when I entered. He was dressed in a jacket and pantaloons of velvet, and had around his neck an immense scarf of white silk. I do not cherish resentment against this young man. He has never to his knowledge injured me. He had no share in his parent's crime, I am therefore able to speak of him with justice. He is handsome, has a noble air, and carries gracefully the name which does not belong to him. He is about my height, of the same brown complexion, and would resemble me, perhaps, if he did not wear a beard. Yet he appears at least five years younger ; but this is readily explained, he has neither worked nor suffered. He is one of the fortunate ones of the earth, who traverse life's road on such soft cushions that they are never injured by the jolting of the carriage. On seeing me, he arose and saluted me graciously."

" You must have been dreadfully excited."

" Less than I am at this moment : remember, I was a fortnight preparing for this interview ; and a fortnight of mental torture exhausts one's emotions. I answered the question I saw upon his lips. ' Monsieur,' said I, ' you do not know me ; but that is of little consequence. I come to you, charged with a very grave, a very sad mission, which not only interests you, but touches the honour of the name you bear.' Without doubt he did not believe me ; for,

in a tone of the coolest impertinence, he asked me, ' Shall you be long ? ' I answered as coolly, ' Yes.' "

" Pray," said Père Tabaret, becoming very attentive, " do not omit a single detail ; it may be very important, you understand."

" The viscount," continued Noel, " appeared much disquieted. At length he said courteously, ' My time is hardly at my own disposal this morning. I am at this hour engaged to call upon my fiancée, Mademoiselle d'Arlanges. Can we not postpone this conversation ? ' "

" Good ! another woman," said the old fellow to himself.

" I answered the viscount that an explanation would admit of no delay ; and, as I saw him prepare to dismiss me, I drew from my pocket the count's correspondence, and presented to him one of the letters. On recognising his father's handwriting, he became more tractable, declared himself at my service, and demanded permission to write a word of apology to the lady by whom he was expected. Having written the note hastily, he handed it to his valet, and ordered him to send it to Mademoiselle d'Arlanges immediately ; then, opening the door of the adjoining apartment, his library, he requested me to enter."

" One word," interrupted the old fellow ; " was he troubled on seeing the letters ? "

" Not the least in the world. After closing the door, he handed me a chair, and, seating himself, said, ' Now, monsieur, explain yourself.' I was fully prepared for the situation, and decided to strike a grand *coup*.

" ' Monsieur,' said I, ' my mission is painful. The facts I am about to reveal to you are incredible. I beseech you, do not interrupt me, and do not answer me until you have read the letters I am about to show you.' He regarded me with an air of extreme surprise, and answered, ' Speak ! I can hear all.' I stood up. ' Monsieur,' said I, ' I must inform you that you are not the legitimate son of M. de Commarin, as this correspondence will prove to you. The legitimate son exists ; and he it is who sends me.' I kept my eyes on his while speaking ; and I saw there a passing gleam of fury : for a moment I expected he was about to spring at my throat. He spoke quickly. ' The letters,' said he in a short tone. I handed them to him."

" How," cried Père Tabaret, " these letters—the true ones ? How imprudent ! "

" And why ? "

" If he had—I don't know ; but——" The old fellow hesitated. The advocate leaned his powerful hand upon the old man's shoulder.

" I was there," said he in a hollow tone ; " and I promise you the letters were in no danger."

Noel's features assumed such a sudden expression of ferocity that the old fellow was terrified, and recoiled instinctively.

" He would have killed him," thought he.

The advocate resumed.

" That which I have done for you this evening, my friend, I did for the viscount. I obviated, at least for the moment, the necessity of reading all of these hundred and fifty-six letters, by directing his attention to those marked with a cross, and to the passages of most especial importance, indicated with a red pencil."

" It was an abridgement of his penance," said Père Tabaret.

" He was seated," continued Noel, " before a little table, too fragile even to lean upon. I was resting against the mantelpiece. I followed his slightest movements ; and I scanned his features closely. Never in my life have I seen so sad a spectacle. I shall never forget it, were I to live a thousand years. In less than five minutes his face changed to a degree that his own valet would not have recognised him. He held his handkerchief in his hand, with which from time to time mechanically he wiped his lips ; and, as he read, the lips became as white as the handkerchief. Large drops of sweat stood upon his forehead ; and his eyes became dull and clouded, as if a film had covered them : but not an exclamation, not a sign, not a groan, escaped him, not even a gesture. At one moment, I felt such pity for him that I was almost on the point of snatching the letters from his hands, throwing them into the fire, and, taking him in my arms, crying, ' No, you are my brother ! Forget all ; let us remain each one in his place ! Let us love one another.' "

Père Tabaret took Noel's hand, and pressed it.

" Ah ! " cried he, " I recognise my generous boy."

" If I have not done this, my friend, it is because I said to myself, ' These letters burned, would he recognise me as his brother ? ' "

' Aye ! " sighed Père Tabaret, " it is true."

" In about half an hour he had finished reading : he arose, and, facing me directly, said, ' You are right, monsieur. If these letters are really written by my father, as I believe them to be, they distinctly prove that I am not the son of the Countess de Commarin.' I did not answer. ' Meanwhile,' continued he, ' these are only presumptions. Are you possessed of other proofs ? ' I expected, of course, a great many other objections. ' Germain,' said I, ' can speak.' He told me that Germain had been dead for several years. Then I spoke of the nurse, the Widow Lerouge. I explained how easily she could be found and questioned, adding that she lived at La Jonchère."

" And what said he, Noel, to this ? " demanded Père Tabaret anxiously.

" He reserved a moment's silence, and appeared to reflect. All on a sudden he struck his forehead, and said, ' I remember ; I know her. I have accompanied my father to her house three times, and have seen him give her considerable sums of money."

" I remarked to him that this was yet another proof. He made no answer, but went out as if to look for something in the adjoining room. He returned after some minutes :

" ' Monsieur,' said he, ' can I meet the legitimate son of the count, my father ? ' I answered, ' You see him before you, monsieur ! ' He bowed his head, and murmured, ' I knew it was he.' He took my hand, and added, ' Brother, I bear you no grudge for the step you have taken. All I ask of you is, to wait eight or ten days, when my father will return. I will explain everything to him ; and I promise you that justice shall be done. I, on my side, lose everything—name, position, fortune, and, worse than all, I shall probably lose my plighted bride, Mademoiselle d'Arlanges, who is dearer to me than life itself. In exchange, it is true I shall find a mother. I will labour to console her for your loss, monsieur, and win her love by tenderness and devotion.' "

" Did he really say that ? "

" Almost word for word."

" Hypocrite ! " growled the old fellow between his teeth.

" What did you say ? " asked Noel.

" I say that he is a fine young man ; and I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance."

" I did not show him the letter referring to the rupture,"

added Noel ; " so that he is ignorant of Madame Gerdys' misconduct. I voluntarily deprived myself of this proof, rather than give him further pain."

" And now ? "

" What am I to do ? I am waiting the count's return. I shall act more freely after hearing what he has to say. To-morrow I shall demand permission from the tribunals to examine the papers belonging to Claudine. If I find the letters, I am saved ; if not—but, as I have told you, I have taken no step since I knew of this assassination. Now, what is your advice ? "

" The briefest counsel demands long reflection," replied the old fellow, who was in haste to depart. " Alas ! my poor boy, what a fate yours has been ! "

" Terrible ! and, in addition to all this distraction, I have pecuniary embarrassments."

" How ! you who spend nothing ? "

" I have advanced large sums on mortgages. I might make use of Madame Gerdy's fortune, which I have hitherto used as my own ; but no, I could not bring myself to it."

" You certainly ought not ; but hold ! I am glad you spoke of money ; you can render me a service."

" Very willingly ; in what way ? "

" I have in my *secrétaire* twelve or fifteen thousand francs, which trouble me exceedingly. You can easily understand why. I am an old man, weak and defenceless. If anyone knew I had this money——"

" You are certainly imprudent in running such a risk," acknowledged the advocate.

" Then," said the old fellow, " to-morrow I will give them to you to take care of."

But, remembering he was about to put himself at M. Daburon's disposal, and that perhaps he might not be free on the morrow, he said :

" But no, I will not wait until to-morrow. This infernal money shall not remain another night in my keeping."

He darted out, and presently reappeared, holding in his hand fifteen banknotes of a thousand francs each.

" If that is not sufficient for the present," said he, handing them to Noel, " you can have more."

" I will give you a receipt," said the advocate.

" Time enough to-morrow."

" And if I die to-night ? "

" Then," said the old fellow to himself, thinking of his will, " someone else will have to be my heir. Good night ! " said he aloud. " You have asked my advice ; I shall require the night for reflection. At present my brain is whirling ; I must go out into the air. If I go to bed now, I shall have a horrible nightmare. Good night, my boy ; patience and courage. Who knows whether at this very hour Providence is not working for you ? "

He went out ; and Noel, leaving his door open, listened to the sound of his footsteps as he descended the stairs. Almost immediately the cry of, " Open, if you please," and the banging of the door apprised him that Père Tabaret was in the street.

He waited a few minutes and refilled his lamp, then took a small packet from one of his bureau drawers, slipped into his pockets the banknotes given him by his old friend, and quitted his study, of which he locked the door. On the landing of the staircase he paused. He listened so intently that even Madame Gerdy's moans were audible to him. Hearing nothing else, he descended on tiptoe. A minute later he was in the street.

CHAPTER V

Communicating with Madame Gerdy's apartments was a room on the ground floor, formerly a coach-house, but used by her as a lumber-room. Here was heaped together all the old rubbish of the household—odd things past service or become useless or cumbrous, and the stores of wood and coal for winter fuel.

This old coach-house had a small door opening on the street, which had been nailed up many years ago ; but Noel had secretly repaired this door, provided it with a lock, of which he kept the key, and by its means was able to enter or leave the house at any hour, without the porter's knowledge.

By this door the advocate went out, using the utmost caution in opening and closing it.

When in the street, he remained a moment stationary, as if hesitating which way to go. Then, turning his steps towards the railway station of St. Lazare, he hailed a passing cab.

" Rue Faubourg Montmartre, at the corner of the Rue Provence—quick ! " said Noel, entering the vehicle.

At the spot named, the advocate alighted, and dismissed the cab. Waiting until it had quite gone, Noel turned into the Rue Provence, and, after walking a few steps, rang the door-bell of one of the handsomest houses in the street.

The door was immediately opened.

When Noel passed before the *loge*, the porter made him a bow, at once respectful and patronising—one of those salutations which Parisian porters reserve for patrons of open hands and well-filled purses.

Arrived at the second floor, the advocate paused, drew a key from his pocket, and entered as if at home.

At the sound of the key in the lock, a young and pretty waiting woman, with a bold pair of eyes, ran towards him.

" Ah, monsieur ! " cried she.

This exclamation escaped her just loud enough to be audible at the extremity of the apartment, and serve as a signal, if needed. It was as if she cried, " Take care ! " Noel did not seem to remark it.

" Madame is there ? " asked he.

" Yes, monsieur, and very angry, too, I can tell you. This morning she wanted me to go in search of you. A little while ago, she spoke of going herself. I have had much difficulty, monsieur, in not disobeying your orders."

" Very well," said the advocate.

" Madame is in the smoking-room," continued the soubrette. " I am making her a cup of tea. Will monsieur have one ? "

" Yes," replied Noel ; " take me through, Charlotte."

They passed through successively a magnificent dining-room, a splendid *salon doré* in the style of Louis XIV, and entered the smoking-room.

This was a rather large apartment, of which the ceiling was remarkably elevated. On entering it, the visitor might easily imagine himself three thousand miles from Paris, in the house of some opulent mandarin of the celestial empire of China. Furniture, carpets, hangings, pictures—all had evidently been imported direct from Hong-Kong or Shanghai.

A rick silk tapestry, representing highly coloured figures, clothed the walls and hung before the doors. All the empire of the sun and moon there defiled before the spectator. Corpulent mandarins disported themselves in vermilion

landscapes, or, surrounded by lanterns, lay stupefied with opium, sleeping under their parasols. Young girls, with almond-shaped eyes, stumbled on their little feet, swathed in bandalettes.

The carpet, the secret of whose weave is unknown in Europe, was strewn with fruits and flowers, whose perfect resemblance to natural objects might have deceived a bee. On the silken canopy, which hid the ceiling, some great artist of Pekin had painted fantastic birds, opening on a background of azure their wings of purple and of gold.

Slender rods of lacquer, encrusted with mother-of-pearl, held the draperies in place, and marked the corners of the apartment.

Two fantastic chests occupied one side of the room. Furniture of capricious and incoherent forms, tables with porcelain tops, and chiffoniers of precious woods encumbered every recess or angle.

Then there were ornamental knick-knacks, purchased in the bazaars of Lien Tsi, le Tahan, from Sou-Tcheou, the artistic city—a thousand impossible and expensive curiosities, from the ivory chop-stick, which takes the place of our fork to the tea-cups of porcelain, thinner than soap-bubbles—miracles of the reign of Kien Loung.

A divan, very large and very low, piled up with cushions covered with tapestry similar to the hangings, ran along the back of the room. There was no window ; but instead a large looking-glass, reaching from floor to ceiling, was let into the wall, in front of which was a double door of glass with movable panes. The space between this glass door and the mirror was filled with plants and rare exotics ; which, being reflected in the mirror, presented the optical illusion of a conservatory.

The absent fireplace and chimney was replaced by registers adroitly concealed, which maintained a temperature in the apartment that seemed to make the flowers blossom upon the silk, truly harmonising with the furnishing of this luxurious abode.

When Noel entered, a young woman was lying on the divan, smoking a cigarette. In spite of the tropical heat, she wore great shawls of magnificent cashmere.

She was petite, and united in her small figure all the physical beauties in such perfection as only small women can. Women who are above medium height are either essays

or errors of nature. If handsome, they invariably present some defect ; like the work of a sculptor, whose faults, unnoticed when presented in a statuette, become glaring when exhibited in a colossal figure.

She was small ; but her neck, her shoulders, and her arms had the most exquisite contours. Her hands, small and plump, even to the retroussé finger-tips and rosy nails, were of marvellous beauty, and seemed preciously cared for. Her feet, encased in silken stockings almost as thin as a cobweb, were a marvel ; not that they recalled the fabled foot which Cinderella thrust into the glassy slipper ; but that other foot —more real, more palpable, though less celebrated—of which the fair owner (the wife of a well-known banker) used to present the model to her admirers in bronze or in marble.

Her face was not beautiful, nor even pretty : but her features were such as one never forgets ; for, at the first glance, they startled the beholder like a flash of lightning. Her forehead was a little high, and her mouth unmistakably large, notwithstanding the provoking freshness of her lips. Her eyebrows seemed to have been drawn with Chinese ink ; but, unhappily the pencil had been used too heavily ; and they gave her an unpleasant expression when she frowned. In revenge for these defects, her smooth complexion had a rich golden pallor ; and her black and velvety eyes possessed enormous magnetic power. Her teeth were sound and of a pearly brilliancy and whiteness ; and her hair, of prodigious opulence, was black and waving, and glossy as a raven's wing.

On perceiving Noel, as he drew aside the silken curtain which served as a door, she half-arose and leaned upon her elbow.

" So you have come at last ? " said she in a tone of vexation : " we ought to be very happy ! "

The advocate was almost suffocated by the oppressive temperature of the room.

" How warm it is ! " said he ; " it is enough to stifle one ! "

" Do you find it warm ? " replied the young woman. " Well, that shows the extent of my suffering ! I am shivering : but it's your fault ; you know that waiting is insupportable to me. It acts upon my nerves ; and I have waited for you since yesterday."

" It has been impossible for me to come," said Noel— " impossible ! "

" You know perfectly well," continued the lady, " that to-day was my settling day ; and I have had quite a number of bills to pay. The upholsterer came. Not a sou to give him. The coachmaker sent his bill. No money : call again ! Then this old swindler who holds my note for three thousand francs—he has been here, making a frightful row ! All this is agreeable, is it not ? "

Noel bowed his head like a truant school-boy, undergoing the pedagogue's rebuke.

" It is but one day behind," murmured he.

" One day behind ! " retorted the young woman ; " and is that nothing ? A man who respects himself may permit his own note to be protested, if he will ; but that of his mistress, never !

" Who do you think I am ! " continued she, working herself into a passion. " Do you forget that I receive no consideration from you except money ? Very well, since I am to have nothing else, I will have that at all events ; and the day it is not forthcoming, I bid you good-bye."

" My dear Juliette—— ! " began the advocate gently.

" Oh, yes ! that's all very fine ; but I have heard it all before," interrupted she. " Your dear Juliètte ! your adored Juliette ! and, as long as you are face to face with Juliette, she is an angel, if she would allow you to make a fool of her : but, no sooner have you turned your back upon Juliette, than she is given to the winds ; and you never take the trouble even to remember that there *is* such a person as Juliette ! "

" How unjust you are ! " replied Noel. " As if you are not well assured that I am always thinking of you. Have I not proved it to you a thousand times ? See ! I am going to prove it to you again this instant."

So saying, he produced the small packet he had taken from his bureau, and, opening it, showed her a handsome velvet casket.

" See ! " said he exultingly, " the bracelet you wished for so much, a week ago, at M. Beaugrau's."

Madame Juliette, without rising, held out her hand to take the jewel-case, and, opening it with the utmost nonchalance, glanced at the magnificent bauble ; then, closing the casket, she threw it carelessly upon a little table near her, saying :

" It looked much prettier in the shop-window."

" I am unfortunate, this evening," said the advocate,

apparently much mortified at the reception of his costly present.

" Unfortunate, my friend ? Indeed, how so ? "

" I see plainly the bracelet does not please you."

" Oh, yes ! it is very pretty ; at all events, it will complete the two dozen."

At this Noel almost lost patience ; but he controlled himself ; and, as she was silent, he went on :

" You don't seem very pleased with it."

" Oh, indeed ! " cried the lady. " I am not grateful enough ! I am not sufficiently profuse in my acknowledgments, to please my generous benefactor ? You bring me a present, and expect instant payment. I am to fill the house with cries of joy, and throw myself upon my knees before your feet, calling you a great and magnificent seigneur ! "

Noel was unable this time to restrain a gesture of impatience ; which Juliette perceived plainly enough, to her great delight.

" Is that sufficient ? " continued she. " Or must I call Charlotte to admire this superb monument of your generosity ? Shall I run downstairs to exhibit it to the porter ? Shall I go into the kitchen and dazzle the eyes of my cook, and ask her if I ought not to be happy in the possession of a lover so unboundedly munificent ? "

The advocate raised his shoulders like a philosopher unable to answer the jests of a child.

" A truce to these cutting witticisms," said he. " If you have any complaint against me, better to say so simply and seriously."

" So be it," said Juliette quickly, changing her manner. " Let us be serious. And, being so, let me tell you it would have been better to have forgotten the bracelet, and remembered the eight thousand francs of which I have such pressing need."

" I could not come."

" You might send ; there are messengers at the street-corners."

" If I have neither brought nor sent them, my dear Juliette, it was because I did not have the amount. I have trouble enough in getting a promise of it to-morrow. If I have the sum this evening, I owe it to a chance upon which I could not have counted an hour ago ; and I have brought it to you to-night, at the risk of compromising myself."

" Poor man ! " said Juliette, in a tone of pity ; then, incredulously, " Do you dare to tell me you have had difficulty in finding ten thousand francs—you ? "

" Yes," replied Noel calmly, " I ! "

The young woman looked at her lover, and burst into a fit of laughter.

" You are superb in the rôle of poor young man ! " said Juliette scornfully.

" It is not a rôle," said Noel stolidly.

" What do you say ? " exclaimed she ; " but I see what we are coming to. This amiable confession is the preface. To-morrow you will be very much embarrassed ; and the day after to-morrow you will be ruined ! Avarice is the name of the complaint that afflicts you, my friend. Do you not feel a pang of remorse for all the money you have lavished upon me ? "

" Selfish woman ! " murmured Noel angrily.

" Truly," continued the lady, " I pity you, unfortunate lover ! Shall I get up a subscription for you ? In your place, I should issue an appeal to the benevolent."

Noel lost his temper, in spite of his resolution.

" You think it a laughing matter ? " asked he bitterly. " Well, understand me, Juliette ; I am at the end of my expedients. I have exhausted my resources ! I am ruined ! "

The eyes of the young woman brightened. She regarded her lover tenderly.

" Oh, if 'twas only true ! " said she. " If I could only believe you ! "

The advocate was wounded to the heart.

" She believes me," thought he ; " and she is glad : she detests me."

He was deceived. Madame Juliette never loved him so well as at that moment. The idea that he had loved her to the extent of ruining himself for her, without even a reproach for her extravagance, almost transported her with joy. It was but for a moment, however. She became immediately incredulous. The expression of her eyes changed quickly.

" What a fool you must think me, to come with your romantic stories of ruin, and expect me to believe them ! No, no, my friend ; such men as you do not ruin themselves. It is your vain young coxcombs and your drivelling old dotards who ruin themselves for their mistresses. You are a

very gay young spark ; but you never lose your senses. You are very grave and prudent, and, above all, very strong."

" Not with you," murmured Noel.

" Pshaw ! then leave me alone. You know well what you are about. Instead of a heart, you have a calculating machine. You have taken a fancy to me, and appraised me. You have said to yourself, ' I can afford to pay this passion so much ' ; and you hold yourself to your word. It is an investment, like any other, in which one receives a certain amount of interest agreed upon. You are capable of all the folly and extravagance in the world that does not go beyond your limit of four thousand francs a month ! If it runs twenty sous over the amount fixed, you take up your heart and your hat, and carry them somewhere else."

" It is true," answered Noel coolly. " I know how to count ; and that accomplishment is very useful to me now, since it enables me to know how and where I have spent my fortune."

" Do you really know ? " sneered Juliette.

" And I can tell you," continued he. " At first, you were not exacting ; but the appetite came with eating. You wished for luxury ; you had it : splendid furniture ; I gave it : extravagant toilettes, a house in the Rue Provence, with a marble staircase in front, a carriage, a pair of English horses : I responded, I denied you nothing. You had everything you desired. I don't speak of a thousand fantasies. I include neither this Chinese cabinet nor the two dozen bracelets. The total is four hundred thousand francs ! "

" Are you sure ? "

" As one can be who has had that amount, and has it no longer."

" Four hundred thousand francs, just ? Are there no centimes ? "

" No."

" There, my dear friend, I will present you with the bills duly receipted ; and you will be satisfied."

The entrance of the waiting woman with the tea-tray interrupted this amorous duet, of which Noel had experienced more than one repetition.

Madame Juliette Chaffour was a Parisienne. She was born about 1839, in the highest apartment of a house in the Faubourg Montmartre. Her mother was a beauty of some note in her day. Her father was unknown. Her infancy was

a long alternation of beatings and caresses, equally furious ; and she was fed on sugar-plums, sour wine, and damaged fruit : so that her stomach was as depraved as her intelligence. At twelve years old, she was thin as a nail, and green as a June apple ; and, as for her mental training, a strict moralist would have considered her a precocious little wretch, totally destitute of principle.

As she gave no promise of beauty, she was placed in a store, to study the art and mystery of selling ribbons and laces ; when a wealthy and highly respectable gentleman—an old friend of her mamma's many years ago—accorded her his protection. This prudent old gentleman was a connoisseur, and detected the promise of charms where others saw only indications of ugliness. He sent his protégé to a school, to receive a varnish of education. Here she learned to read and write very badly, to play the piano tolerably, and to waltz to such perfection that she turned the head of a foreign ambassador, whom her old protector brought to see her at one of his visits.

When the old gentleman came to take her from the seminary, he found she had been taken away already, by a young artist, who offered her half of everything he possessed ; that is to say, nothing. At the end of three months, she quitted the studio of her artistic admirer, with her entire wardrobe tied up in a cotton pocket handkerchief.

During the four years which followed, she led a precarious existence—sometimes with little else to live upon but Hope, which never wholly abandons a young girl who knows she has good eyes. By turns she sank to the bottom, and again rose to the surface of the stream down which she was being carried. But she was reckless and imprudent. Twice had Fortune come knocking at her door ; and she had not the sense to seize him by his hair.

With the assistance of a captain of a coasting vessel, she managed to get an appearance at a small theatre, and acquitted herself adroitly enough in the trifling rôles entrusted to her ; when Noel, by the merest accident, encountered her. He loved her ; and she became his mistress.

The advocate did not displease her at first. She admired him for his polite manners, his distinguished air, his learning, his knowledge of the world, his contempt for all that was unworthy, and, above all, for his unalterable patience,

which nothing could tire. Soon, however, she began to discover qualities to her less admirable. He was not amusing. He never made her laugh. He absolutely refused to accompany her to any of the numerous places of amusement where gaiety puts on her holiday garb and laughter reigns supreme. For absolute lack of employment, she began to squander money ; and, in proportion to the gratification of her extravagant desires and the sacrifices made by her lover, her aversion to him increased.

She made him the most miserable of men, and treated him like a dog ; and this not from natural badness of disposition, but from a firm belief in the precept—the only one ever taught her by her mamma—that a woman is beloved in proportion to the trouble she causes and the mischief she does.

Juliette was not wicked ; and she believed she had much to complain of. The dream of her life was to be loved in a way which she felt, but could scarcely have explained. She had never been to her lover more than a plaything. She understood this ; and, as she was naturally proud, the idea enraged her. She dreamed of a lover who would be devoted enough to make a real sacrifice for her—who would descend to her level, instead of attempting to raise her to his. She despaired of meeting such a man.

Noel's extravagance, instead of melting her heart, hardened it. She believed he was very rich, and actually resented his liberality as the insolence of wealth ; for, strange to say, in spite of her extravagance, she cared little for money. Noel would have been an immense gainer by an outspoken frankness that would have shown her clearly his situation. He lost her love by the delicacy of his dissimulation, that left her ignorant of the sacrifices he was making for her.

Noel adored Juliette. Until the fatal day he saw her, he had been a sage, a model of prudence and integrity. This, his first and only passion, burned him up ; and, from the disaster, he saved only appearances. The four walls remained standing ; but the interior of the edifice was destroyed. Even heroes have their vulnerable parts. The most artfully constructed armour has a joint somewhere. By Juliette, Noel was assailable ; and her entrance made way for everything. For her, in four years, this model young man, this advocate of the immaculate reputation, this austere moralist, had wasted not only his own fortune, but Madame Gerdy's also.

He loved Juliette madly, without reflection, without measure, with his eyes shut. Near her, he forgot all prudence, and became reckless of consequences. In her boudoir, he dropped his mask of habitual dissimulation, and his vices displayed themselves at ease, as his limbs in a bath.

He felt himself so powerless against her that he never essayed to struggle. She possessed him. Once or twice he had attempted to oppose firmly her caprices ; but she had made him pliable as the osier. Under the dark glances of this girl, his strongest resolutions melted more quickly than snow beneath the April sun. She tortured him ; but she had also the power to repay him for all—by a word, a smile, a single tear, or a caress.

Away from the enchantress, reason returned at intervals ; and, in his lucid moments, he said to himself, " She does not love me. She is amusing herself with my folly, and laughing at my infatuation." But her love had taken such deep root in his heart that he could not pluck it forth. He made himself a monster of jealousy, to torture him still more, and was constantly occupied in arguments within himself respecting her fidelity. But he never had the courage to declare his suspicions. " I should either have to leave her," thought he, " or accept everything in the future." At the idea of a separation from her, he trembled, and felt his passion strong enough to compel him to submit to the lowest indignity. He preferred even his desolating doubts to a still more dreadful certainty.

The presence of the maid, who took a considerable time in arranging the tea-table, gave Noel an opportunity to recover himself. He looked at Juliette ; and his anger took flight. Already he began to fear he had been a little cruel to her.

When Charlotte retired, he came and took a seat on the divan beside his mistress, and attempted to put his arms round her.

" Come," said he in a caressing tone, " you have been angry enough for this evening. If I have done wrong, you have punished me sufficiently. Make peace, and embrace me." She replused him angrily, and said in a dry tone :

"Let me alone ! How many times must I repeat that I am nervous this evening ? "

" Nervous, my dear ? What is the matter, then ? Shall I bring a doctor ? "

" There is no need. I know the nature of my malady.

It is called boredom ; and the doctor cannot cure me."

Noel rose with a discouraged air, and took his place at the other side of the tea-table, facing her. His resignation bespoke how habituated he had become to these rebuffs. Juliette snubbed him ; but he returned always, like the poor dog who lies in wait for the instant when his caresses may not be inopportune.

" You have told me very often, during the last few months, that you feel bored. What have I done to you ? "

" Nothing."

" Well, why then—— ? "

" My life is nothing more than a long imprisonment," answered the young woman, with flashing eyes. " Do you think it very amusing to be shut up here all alone until you come in, like a mute at a funeral ? Look at yourself—sad, disagreeable, restless, suspicious, devoured by a prying jealousy ! "

" Your reception of me, my dear Juliette, this evening," ventured Noel, " was enough to extinguish gaiety and freeze good humour ; and, as for my jealousy, one fears where one loves."

" Thank you, monsieur. I am the occasion of your sad looks and grave speeches ! Go, then, and find another woman expressly formed to suit your ideas, and, if you cannot find her, have one made to order ; and, when you get her, then shut her up in a cave, and show her to yourself once a day, after dinner, with the dessert, when the champagne is on the table. That's your idea of happiness, is it ? "

" I should have done better not to have come," murmured the advocate.

" Indeed ! That I might remain alone here, without anything to occupy me except a cigarette and a stupid book, that I go to sleep over ? Do you call this an existence, even, never to budge out of the house ? "

" It is the life of all the honest women that I know," replied the advocate dryly.

" Then I cannot compliment them on their enjoyment. They merit all the respect they gain by being honest women, if they have no more amusement than that. Happily for me, however, I am not an honest woman ; although I might as well be, housed up more closely than the wife of a Turk, with your sorrowful face for my only distraction."

" You housed up ? You live in a prison—you ? "

" Yes, I ! " continued Juliette, with eager opposition. " Let us see. Have you ever brought one of your friends here ? No. Monsieur hides me. When have you offered me your arm for a promenade ? Never. Monsieur's dignity would be sullied, if he were seen in my company. I have a carriage. Have you entered it three times ? Perhaps ; but then you pulled down the blinds ! I ride out alone. I promenade alone."

" Always the same refrain," interrupted Noel, his anger beginning to rise, " without ceasing these discontented complainings, as if you had yet to learn the reason why this state of things exists."

" I am not ignorant," pursued the young girl, " that you blush for me. I know, at the same time, men who carry higher crests than yours who willingly show themselves by the side of their mistresses. Monsieur trembles for the fine name of Gerdy that I am tarnishing ; whilst the sons of the greatest families in France are not afraid to proclaim their preferences to all the world."

This home-thrust enraged Noel, to the great delight of Madame Chaffour.

" Enough of this ! " cried he, rising. " If I hide our relations, it is because I am constrained to do so. What do you complain of ? You have unrestrained liberty ; and you use it, too, and so largely that your actions altogether escape me. You accuse me of creating a vacuum around you. I bring no friends to visit you. Am I to blame for the circumstances of my position ? My friends have been accustomed to see me in a home whose aspect speaks of modest competence, not unrestrained extravagance. Can I bring them here, to be astonished by your luxury, by this suite of apartments—a monument of my folly ? Would they not inquire of me, from whom have I taken the money that maintains this mad profusion ?

" I may have a preference : granted ; but I have no right to throw away a fortune which is not my own. The day it becomes known that my folly enables you to pursue your career of extravagance, my future prospects are destroyed. What client would confide his interests to an imbecile who permitted himself to be ruined by the woman whose toilettes are the talk of Paris ? I am not a noble. I have neither an historical name to tarnish nor an immense

fortune to lose. I am Noel Gerdy, advocate. My reputation is all that I possess. It is a false reputation, you will say. Be it so. Such as it is, it is necessary to me ; and I will endeavour to keep it."

Juliette knew Noel by heart. She saw that she had gone far enough.

" My friend," said she tenderly, " I do not wish to pain you. You must be indulgent. I am horribly nervous this evening."

This simple change of tone delighted the advocate, and sufficed almost to calm his anger.

" You drive me mad with your injustice," said he. " While I exhaust my imagination to find what can be agreeable to you, you are perpetually attacking my gravity ; and forty-eight hours have not elapsed since we were plunged in all the extravagance of the carnival. To please you, I kept Shrove Tuesday like a student. I took you to the theatre ; I put on a domino, and accompanied you to the ball at the opera, and even invited two of my friends to sup with us."

" It was very gay indeed," answered the young girl, making a wry face.

" So it seemed to me."

" Did it, indeed ? Then you are not difficult to please. We went to the Vaudeville, it is true, but separately, as we always do—I alone above, you below. At the ball, you looked the very picture of misery ; and, at the supper-table, your friends were as melancholy as a pair of owls. I obeyed your orders, by affecting hardly to know you ; and, by the way, although you drank like a sponge, I could not see that you became a whit more cheerful, even when you were drunk."

" A proof," interrupted Noel, " that we ought not to force our tastes. Let us talk of something else."

He took a few steps in the room, and looked at his watch.

" An hour gone already," said he. " My love, I must leave you."

" How, already ? "

" Yes, to my great regret : my mother is dangerously sick."

He displayed, and counted on the table, the banknotes given him by Père Tabaret.

" My little Juliette," said he, " here are not eight

thousand francs, but ten thousand. You will not see me again for some days."

"You are going to leave Paris, then?"

"No, but my entire time will be absorbed by an affair of immense importance. If I succeed in my undertaking, mignonne, our future happiness is assured; and you will soon see how well I love you."

"Oh, my dear Noel, tell me what it is."

"I cannot, now."

"Tell me, I beseech you," pleaded the young girl, hanging round his neck, raising herself upon the points of her toes to approach her lips to his. The advocate embraced her; and his resolution seemed to waver.

"No," said he, at length, "I am serious, I cannot. Of what use to awaken in you hopes that may never be realised? Now, my darling, listen to me. Whatever may happen, understand, you must under no pretext whatever again come near my house, as you had once the imprudence to do. Do not even write to me. By disobeying, you may do me an irreparable injury. If any accident occurs, send for me by this old extortioner, Clergeot. I ought to have a visit from him to-morrow, or the day after; he holds notes of mine."

Juliette recoiled, menacing Noel with a mutinous gesture.

"You will not tell me anything?" insisted she.

"Not this evening; but shortly I will tell you everything," replied the advocate, embarrassed by the piercing glances of her dark eyes.

"Always some mystery!" cried Juliette, piqued at the want of success attending her blandishments.

"This will be the last, I swear to you!"

"Noel, my good man," said the young girl in a serious tone, "you are hiding something from me: I know it; I read it in your face. For several days—how I cannot precisely explain—you have been completely changed."

"I swear to you, Juliette——"

"No, swear nothing; I should not believe you. Only, remember, no attempt at deceiving me, I warn you. I am a woman to revenge myself."

The advocate evidently was ill at ease.

"The affair in question," stammered he, "can as well fail as succeed."

"Enough!" interrupted Juliette; "your will shall be

obeyed. I promise that. All right, monsieur. Good night. I am going to bed."

The door was not shut upon Noel when Charlotte was installed on the divan, near her mistress. Had the advocate been listening at the door, he would have heard Madame Juliette say :

" What a scene ! No, Charlotte, I can endure him no longer. I am afraid of him. He is capable of killing me ! I can see it in his glance."

The soubrette vainly tried to defend Noel ; but her mistress did not listen. She murmured :

" Why does he keep away ? and what is he plotting ? Some mischief, I am sure. An absence of a week ! It is suspicious. Can he by any chance be going to be married ? Ah ! if I knew it. You weary me to death, my good Noel, with your gravity and your jealousy ; and I'm determined to break with you one of these fine mornings ; but I cannot permit you to quit me first. I cannot allow you to get married, and dismiss me. No, no, my mysterious friend, I must have some information about your business of immense importance."

But Noel did not listen at the door. He left the house in haste, descended the Rue Provence as quickly as possible, gained the Rue St. Lazare, and entered as he had departed—by the secret door. He had hardly reached his study, when the nurse knocked at the door.

" Monsieur," said the woman, " in the name of heaven, answer me ! "

He opened the door, and said with impatience, " What is it now ? "

" Monsieur," stammered the servant in tears, " this is the third time I have called, and you have not answered. Come, I implore you. I am afraid madame is dying ! "

He followed the nurse to Madame Gerdy's chamber. He must have found her terribly changed ; for he could not restrain a movement of terror.

The sick woman struggled painfully beneath her coverings. Her face was of a livid paleness, as though there was not a drop of blood in her veins ; and her eyes, which glittered with a sombre fire, seemed covered with a film. Her hair, loose and disordered, falling over her cheeks and upon her shoulders, contributed to her wild appearance. She uttered from time to time a groan hardly audible,

or murmured unintelligible words. At times, a fiercer pang than common forced from her a cry of anguish. She did not recognise Noel.

"You see, monsieur," said the nurse.

"Yes. Who would have believed her malady could advance so rapidly? Quick, run to Dr. Hervé! He will come immediately, when you tell him it is for me."

And he seated himself in the armchair, facing the sick woman.

Doctor Hervé was one of Noel's friends—an old schoolfellow, his companion of the Quartier Latin, in his student days. The doctor's history differed in nothing from that of most young men, who, without fortune, friends, or influence, enter upon the practice of the most difficult, the most hazardous of professions in Paris.

A man of remarkable courage and self-reliance, conscious of possessing a superior talent, Hervé determined neither to exile himself in a country village, nor place himself under the control of some unprincipled dealer in drugs, as many of his companions were reduced to the necessity of doing, to gain a bare subsistence. "I will remain in Paris," he said to himself; "I will become celebrated there. I shall be surgeon-in-chief of the hospital, and wear the cross of the Legion of Honour."

To enter upon this path of thorns, leading to an arch of triumph, the future academician ran himself twenty thousand francs in debt to furnish a small office. Here, armed with a patience which nothing could fatigue, an iron resolution that nothing could subdue, he struggled and waited. Only those who have experienced it can understand what sufferings are endured by the poor, proud man, with smiling lips, who waits in a black coat, while he is starving of hunger. The refinements of civilisation have inaugurated punishments compared to which the torture practised on his victim by the savage Indian is mercy.

The unknown physician must begin by attending the sick-beds of the poor who cannot pay him, becoming known to the mass of human beings who take advantage of the needs of their fellow-men. He is called in by a citizen of the better class, to save the expense of employing a more thriving practitioner. The sick man is profuse in promises while he is in danger; but, when cured, he recovers the use of his faculties and forgets the doctor's fee.

After seven years of heroic perseverance, Hervé obtained at last a circle of patients who paid his fees. During this time, he had lived and paid the exorbitant interest of his debt ; but he had succeeded at last. Three or four pamphlets, and a prize won without much intrigue, attracted public attention to him. He became the great, the famous physician of Paris.

But he was no longer the brave young enthusiast, full of the faith and hope that attended him in his visits to the poor, whose lives he saved without other payment than their prayers. He came now to the rich man's sick-bed, stronger and more self-reliant than ever, it is true, but neither hoping for nor rejoicing in success. He had used up those feelings in the days when he had no money with which to pay for his dinner. For his great fortune in the time to come, he had paid too dearly in the past ; and now to attain success was to take a revenge. At thirty-five, he was blasé, filled with disgust at the deceptions of the world, and believing in nothing. Under the appearance of universal benevolence, he concealed universal scorn. His finesse, sharpened by the grindstone of adversity, had become mischievous. And, while he saw through all disguises worn by others, he hid his penetration carefully under a mask of cheerful good-nature and jovial lightness.

But he was good, he was devout, and he loved his friends.

He arrived, hardly dressed, so great had been his haste. His first word on entering was :

" What is the matter ? "

Noel pressed his hand in silence, and pointed to the bed.

In less than a minute, the doctor completed his examination of the sick woman, and returned to his friend.

" What has happened to her ? " demanded he shortly. " It is necessary I should know."

The advocate started at this question.

" Know what ? " stammered he.

" All," answered Hervé. " This is a case of encephalitis. I cannot be mistaken in the symptoms. It is an uncommon malady, and generally fatal. Even when the life of the patient is saved, the functions of the brain usually remain arrested. Who can have occasioned this ? There is no local injury to the brain or its bony covering. The mischief has been caused by some violent emotion of the soul—a shock, news of some catastrophe ! "

Noel interrupted his friend by a gesture, and drew him into the embrasure of the window.

"Yes, my friend," said he in a low tone, "Madame Gerdy has experienced great mental suffering. She has been tortured by remorse for crime, and apprehension of discovery. Listen, Hervé. I will confide to your honour and our friendship a secret. Madame Gerdy is not my mother. She has despoiled me, to enrich her son with my fortune and my name. Three weeks have elapsed since my discovery of this unworthy fraud. This discovery was the shock you have suspected. Since then, she has been dying minute by minute."

The advocate expected some exclamations of astonishment, some questions regarding the particulars of this singular history, from his friend ; but the doctor received the explanation without remark, as a simple statement, indispensable to his understanding the case.

"Three weeks," murmured he ; "that explains everything. Has she appeared to suffer much during the time ?"

"She complained of violent pains in the head, dimness of sight, and a noise as of the surging of water in her ears. But do not conceal anything from me, Hervé ; is there serious danger ?"

"So serious, my friend, that I am undertaking a hopeless task in attempting to cure."

"Oh ! good heavens !"

"You asked for the truth, my friend ; and I have had the courage to answer, because you tell me this poor woman is not your mother. Nothing short of a miracle can save her ; but this miracle we may prepare for. And now to work."

CHAPTER VI

Eleven o'clock was striking at the terminus of St. Lazare, when Père Tabaret left his house, stunned and bewildered by the flood of information so unexpectedly poured upon him. Having been obliged to restrain himself while in Noel's presence, his sudden release to the freedom of speech and deportment was delightful. On gaining the street, he reeled like a drunkard when he first breathes the open air after leaving the heated atmosphere of the wine-shop, so intense was the effect of the sudden revelation just made by his friend Noel.

Notwithstanding his haste to arrive at M. Daburon's, he did not take a carriage. He felt the necessity of walking. He was one of those to whose brain exercise brings clearness. As he went along, his ideas clashed and shifted themselves, as grains of wheat when shaken in a basket. Without hastening his pace, he gained the Rue Chaussée d'Antin, crossed the boulevard with its resplendent cafés, and turned into the Rue Richelieu.

He walked along, unconscious of external objects, tripping and stumbling over the road, or slipping on the greasy pavement. If he followed the proper road, it was a purely mechanical impulse that guided him. His mind was following through the darkness the mysterious thread of which he had seized the almost imperceptible end at Jonchère.

Persons labouring under strong emotion frequently, without knowing it, utter their thoughts aloud, little thinking into what indiscreet ears their revelations or disjointed phrases may fall. At every step, we meet in Paris people babbling to themselves, and unconsciously confiding to the four winds of heaven their dearest secrets, like cracked vases that allow their contents to leak away. Often the passers-by take these eccentric monologuists for madmen. Often the idle or curious follow, and amuse themselves by receiving these strange confidences. It was an indiscretion of this kind which told the ruin of Riscara, the rich banker. Lambreth, the assassin of the Rue Venise, betrayed himself in a similar manner.

"What a vein!" said Père Tabaret. "What an incredible piece of good fortune! Gevrol has well said that, after all, the cleverest detective is chance. Who would have imagined such a story? I wasn't, however, very far from the reality. I smelt out a brat at the bottom of the mystery! But who would have dreamed of such a thing as the substitution?—an old sensational effect, used up long ago in plays and novels. This shows the danger of following preconceived ideas in police investigation. We are suspicious of unlikelihood; and, as in this case, the greatest unlikelihood proves often to be the truth. We retreat before the absurd; and the absurd turns out to be the very thing we should examine. Everything is possible.

"I would not take a thousand crowns for the experiences of this evening. I shall kill two birds with one stone. I

deliver up the criminal ; and I give Noel a hearty clap on the shoulder to recover his title and his fortune. For once I shall not be sorry to see a boy raised to fortune from the school of adversity. But, pshaw ! he will be like all the rest. Prosperity will turn his head. Already he begins to prate of his ancestors. Poor fellow ! " he burst into a fit of laughter. " It is my friend Madame Gerdy who has astonished me most of all—a woman to whom I would have given absolution before waiting to hear confess ; and then to think that I was on the point of asking her hand in marriage ! What a narrow escape ! B-r-r-r ! "

At this thought, the old fellow shivered. He saw himself married, and all on a sudden discovering the antecedents of Madame Tabaret, becoming mixed up with a scandalous prosecution, compromised, and made ridiculous.

" When I think," he went on, laughing, as his thoughts took another direction—" when I think of my worthy Gevrol running after the man with the ear-rings in his ears ! Ha, ha ! Travel, my boy, travel ! Travel broadens the mind ! How vexed he will be when he hears of this ! He will wish me dead. I must jest with him a little, just a little. I cannot help it. If he wishes to do me any injury, M. Daburon must protect me. Talking of Daburon, I can see him opening his eyes like saucers, when I say to him, ' I have the rascal ! ' This investigation will bring him honour, when all the credit is due to me. He will, at the least, receive the cross of honour. So much the better. He will come to me again, this judge. If he is asleep, I am going to give him an agreeable awaking. How he will overpower me with questions ! How he will want to know the end, before I can relate the beginning ! "

Père Tabaret, who was now crossing the bridge of St. Peré's, stopped suddenly. " Wait ! " he said, " the details ? I have not got them. I know the story only in the gross."

He continued his walk, and resumed : " They are right at the office ; I am too hasty. I am too fond of romancing, as Gevrol says. When I was with Noel I ought to have cross-examined him, until I extracted from him all those little points of evidence which now I can only guess at ; but I was carried away. I drank in his words. I would willingly have had him tell the story in one sentence. But, after all, it's natural. You don't stop for a rabbit when you're hunting a lion. Besides, by insisting on minute particulars, I might

have awakened suspicions in Noel's mind, and led him to discover that I am working up the case for the Rue Jerusalem. To be sure, I don't blush for being connected with the police ; I am even vain of it ; but I love to think that no one suspects it—to see how stupid people are in not knowing the police who protect and guard them. And now for the interview ; for here we are at the end of our journey."

M. Daburon had gone to bed, but had given orders to his servant ; so that Père Tabaret had but to give his name to be conducted to the magistrate's sleeping-room.

At sight of his amateur agent, the judge addressed him quickly :

" There is something extraordinary ! What have you discovered ? Have you got a clue ? "

" Better than that," answered the old fellow, smiling at ease.

" Speak quickly ! "

" I have got the culprit ! "

Père Tabaret ought to have been satisfied ; he certainly produced an effect. The judge bounded from his bed.

" Already ? " said he. " Is it possible ? "

" I have the honour to repeat that I know the author of the crime of Jonchère."

" And I," said Daburon—" I proclaim you the most able of sleuths past or future. I shall certainly never hereafter undertake an investigation without your assistance."

" You are too kind, monsieur. I have had little or nothing to do in the matter. The discovery is due to chance alone."

" You are modest, M. Tabaret. Chance assists only wise men. She disdains to aid the stupid ; but I beg you to be seated and talk."

Then, with a lucidity and precision of which few would have believed him capable, the old fellow repeated all of Noel's story. He repeated from memory the extracts from the letters, almost without changing a word.

" These letters," added he, " I have seen ; and I have even carried off one, in order to verify the writing. Here it is."

" Yes," murmured the magistrate—" yes, M. Tabaret, you have discovered the criminal. The evidence is palpable, even to the blind. Heaven has willed this. Crime engenders crime. The misdeeds of the father have made the son an assassin."

" I have not given you the names, monsieur," said

Père Tabaret. " I first wished to hear your opinion of the evidence."

" Oh, you can name them," interrupted Daburon, with a certain degree of animation. " If ever so high in position, they shall not escape the law. A French magistrate never hesitates."

" I know it monsieur ; but we are going high this time. The father who has sacrificed his legitimate to his natural son is the Count Rheteau de Commarin ; and the assassin of the Widow Lerouge is the natural son, Albert Vicomte de Commarin ! "

Père Tabaret, like an accomplished artist, had uttered these words with a deliberate emphasis, expecting confidently to produce a great impression. His attempt overshot itself. M. Daburon was struck with stupor. He remained motionless, his eyes dilated with astonishment. Mechanically he repeated it, like a strange word, the sense of which he was trying to understand.

" Albert de Commarin ! Albert de Commarin ! "

" Yes," insisted Père Tabaret, " the noble viscount. He is the last man in the world to be suspected, I know."

But he perceived the alteration in Daburon's face ; and, a little frightened, he approached the bed.

" Are you unwell ? " he asked.

" No," answered Daburon, without knowing what he said. " I am very well ; but the surprise, the emotion——"

" I understand that," said the old fellow.

" I wish you would leave me for a few minutes ; but do not depart. We must converse at some length on this business. Will you step into my study ? There ought to be a fire still burning there. I will rejoin you in an instant."

Then Daburon rose lightly from the bed, put on a dressing-gown, and seated himself, or rather fell, into an armchair. His face, to which the exercise of his austere functions had given the immobility of marble, reflected the most cruel agitation ; while his eyes betrayed the inward agony of his soul.

The name of Commarin, suddenly pronounced, awakened in him the most sorrowful recollections, and tore open a wound but badly healed. This name recalled to him an event which had rudely extinguished his youth and broken his life. Involuntarily, he carried his thoughts back to this epoch, and compelled himself to taste again all its bitterness.

An hour ago, it had seemed to him far removed, and already hidden in the mists of the past. One word had sufficed to recall it, clear and distinct. It seemed to him now that this event with which he connected the name of Albert de Commarin dated from yesterday, instead of which two years had elapsed.

Pierre Marie Daburon belonged to one of the oldest families of Poitou. Three or four of his ancestors had filled successively the most considerable offices in the province. Why, then, had they not bequeathed a title and their arms to their descendants ?

The magistrate's worthy father inhabited an ugly modern castle ; but it was surrounded by about eight hundred thousand francs' worth of the best land in France. His mother was a Cottevise-Luxe, from whom he inherited the blood of the highest nobility of Poitou, one of the most exclusive families in France, as everyone knows.

When he was appointed a judge of inquiry in Paris, his parentage opened for him without delay five or six aristocratic salons ; and he was not slow to extend his circle of acquaintance.

He possessed, however, few of the qualifications for social success. He was cold and grave even to sadness, reserved and timid to excess. His mind wanted brilliancy and lightness ; he lacked the faculty of repartee, and the amiable art of conversing without a subject—which is almost a necessity in mixed companies. He could neither relate a *bon mot* nor pay a compliment. Like most men who feel deeply, he was unable to translate his impressions immediately. Reflection was necessary to him ; and he fell back upon himself.

To compensate for these defects, he possessed other qualities more solid—nobility of sentiment, strength of character, and integrity of purpose. Those who knew him quickly learned to esteem his sound judgment, his keen sense of honour, and to discover under his cold exterior a warm heart, an excessive sensibility, and a delicacy almost feminine. In a word, although he might be eclipsed by the wits and triflers of a crowded salon, he charmed all hearts in a smaller circle, where he felt warmed by the purer atmosphere of sympathy.

He accustomed himself to go abroad a great deal. He reasoned, wisely perhaps, that a magistrate can make better use of his time than by remaining shut up in his study, in

company with books of law. He thought a man, to be a judge, ought to know something of mankind ; and, with that belief, he entered upon the study of the subject. An attentive and discreet observer, he examined around him the play of human interests and passions, exercised himself in disentangling and manœuvring at need the strings of the puppets he saw moving about him. Piece by piece, so to say, he laboured to comprehend the working of the complicated machine called society, of which he was charged to overlook the movements, regulate the springs, and preserve the healthful action.

All on a sudden, towards the commencement of the winter of 1860 and 1861, Daburon disappeared. His friends sought for him ; he was nowhere to be found. What had become of him ? Inquiry resulted in the discovery that he passed nearly all his evenings at Madame d'Arlanges' house. The surprise was as great as it was natural.

This dear marquise was, or rather is—for she is still in the land of the living—a person rather out of date and rococo in the dowagers of the Princess de Southenay's circle. She is surely the most singular link between the eighteenth cen- and our own. How, and by what marvellous process she has been preserved such as we see her, from so remote an age to the present, is a more puzzling question than we can explain. Listening to her, you would swear that she was yesterday at one of the queen's soirées, whose passion for cards was the annoyance of Louis XIV, at whose parties the great ladies cheated openly in emulation of each other.

Manners, language, habits, even costume, she preserved them all ; and, as time had touched them, not to beautify but to disfigure, the effect was not highly pleasing. A glimpse of her head-dress is more than a long article of review of the Court of Louis XIV ; an hour's conversation, more than a volume of the *Confessions of Madame de Maintenon.*

She was born in a little German principality, where her parents had taken refuge from their wild and rebellious people. She had been nursed, when a child, on the knees of old emigrés, in a salon very old and very much gilded, resembling a cabinet of curiosities. Her mind was awakened amid the hum of antediluvian conversations, her imagination aroused by arguments a little less profitable than those of an assembly of dunces, convoked to decide the merits of a Greek hexameter. Here she imbibed a fund of ideas, which,

applied to the forms of society to-day, are grotesque, as would be those of a person shut up for twenty years in an Assyrian museum.

The Empire, the Restoration, the Monarchy of July, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, had passed beneath her windows ; but she had not taken the pains to open them. All that had taken place since '89 she ignored, or at most looked upon as a dream, a nightmare, and expected an awakening. She had seen everything ; but she had seen it through spectacles of her own making, which present objects not as they are, but as she wished them to be.

At the age of sixty-eight, she was straight as an arrow, and had never known a day's sickness. She ate her four meals a day with the appetite of a grape-gatherer, and drank when she was thirsty. She was so vivacious and active that she never rested save when sleeping, or when seated at her favourite game of piquet. She professed an undisguised contempt for the silly women of our century, who dine on the wing of a partridge, and talk you to death with philosophical disquisitions. Positive and overbearing in all things, her word was prompt and easily understood. Her language was never rendered obscure by unnecessary delicacy. She never shrank from using the most appropriate words to express her meaning. If she offended some refined ears, so much the worse—for their owners. What she most detested was hypocrisy.

She believed in God ; but she believed also a little in Voltaire. In fact, her devotion was, to say the least, problematical. However, she was on good terms with the curate of her parish, and was very particular about the arrangement of her dinner on the days she honoured him with an invitation to her table. She considered him a subaltern, very useful to her salvation, and deserving of the honour of opening for her the gate of Paradise.

She was shunned like the plague. Everybody dreaded her high voice, her terrible indiscretion, and the frankness of speech she seemed to affect in order to claim the right of saying the most unpleasant things before your face. Of all her family, there remained only her granddaughter, whose father had died very young.

Of an originally large fortune she had been able to preserve but a small remnant, on which she supported her small household in genteel or, rather, aristocratic poverty.

She was, however, proprietor of the pretty little house in which she lived near the Invalides, situated between a rather narrow court and a very extensive and beautiful garden.

So circumstanced, she considered herself the most unfortunate of God's creatures, and passed the greater part of her time crying *miserère* ! From time to time, she declared, she expected to be reduced to absolute beggary, and to die in a hospital.

A friend of M. Daburon's presented him one evening to the Marquise d'Arlanges, having dragged him to her house in a mirthful mood, saying, " Come with me, and I will show you a phenomenon—a ghost of the past in flesh and bone."

The marquise received the magistrate graciously enough ; and her eccentricities amused him. On his second visit, she amused him still more ; for which reason, he came a third time. But she amused him no longer ; henceforth, every faculty of his soul was absorbed in studying the charms of the young and tender rose who was blooming into loveliness, in this, to him, enchanted dwelling.

Madame d'Arlanges conceived a violent friendship for him, and became eloquent in his praise.

" A most charming young man," she declared, " delicate and sensible ! What a pity he was not born " (Her ladyship meant born of noble parentage, but used the phrase as ignoring the fact of the unfortunates who are not noble having been born at all) ; " although it is plainly to be seen he ought to be. His family, by the father's side, were people of considerable importance ; and his mother was a Cottevise, who made a mésalliance. I approve of the young man, and shall advance him in the world by my influence."

The strongest proof of the favourable impression he had made upon the marquise was that she condescended to pronounce his name like the rest of the world. She preserved this affectation of forgetfulness of the names of people who were not " born," and who in consequence have no right to names. She was so confirmed in this habit that, if by accident she pronounced the name of one of those people correctly, she repeated it immediately in some ridiculous manner.

At his first visit, the judge was amused to hear his name changed every time she addressed him, in the most unaccountable way. Successively she made it Taburon, Dabiron, Maliron, Laridon ; but in less than three months

she called him Daburon as distinctly as if he had been a duke of something, and seigneur of somewhere.

On occasions, she amused herself, endeavouring to prove to the worthy magistrate that he must be noble, or at least ought to be. She would have been happy if she had succeeded in making him wrap himself up in a title, and put a coat of arms upon his visiting-cards.

" How is it possible," said she, " that your ancestors, eminent, wealthy, and influential, never thought of purchasing a title for their descendants ? What a pity they have not left you some presentable coat of arms ! "

" My ancestors were proud," responded M. Daburon. " They preferred being foremost among their fellow-citizens to becoming newly-created nobles."

Upon which the marquise explained, and proved to a demonstration, that between the most influential and wealthy untitled citizen and the smallest scion of nobility there was an abyss that all the money in the world could not fill up.

They who were surprised at the frequency of the magistrate's visits to this celebrated " relic of the past " had no idea that the real attraction was not the marquise, but her granddaughter, Claire, whose presence enchanted the old-fashioned house.

Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlanges had already seen seventeen summers. She was very gracious and sweet in manner, and ravishing in her natural innocence and fearlessness of harm. She had blonde, ash-coloured hair, very fine and thick, which she wore over a large roll above her forehead, and which fell in large masses upon her neck, in the most artless fashion imaginable. Her figure, though graceful, was rather slender ; but her face recalled the celestial pictures of Guido. Her blue eyes, shaded by long lashes of a hue darker than her hair, had above all an adorable expression.

A certain air of antiquity, caught from association with her grandmother, added yet another charm to the young girl's manners. She had more sense, however, than her relative ; and, as her education was not neglected, she had imbibed ideas of the world in which she lived sufficiently exact to preserve her from imitating her grandmother's absurdities. This education, these practical ideas, Claire owed to her governess, upon whose shoulders the marquise had thrown the sole responsibility of cultivating her mind.

This governess, Mademoiselle Schmidt, chosen at hazard,

taken " with eyes shut," happened by the most fortunate chance to be both well informed and possessed of principle. She was, what is often met with on the other side of the Rhine, a woman at once romantic and practical, of the tenderest sensibility and the severest virtue. This good woman, while she carried her pupil into the land of sentimental phantasy and poetical imaginings, gave her at the same time the most practical instruction in matters relating to actual life ; and, while she deprived Claire of all the peculiarities of thought and manner that rendered her grandmother so ridiculous, she preserved in her mind all the respect that was due to her position and the relations between them.

This was the young girl who attracted M. Daburon to Madame d'Arlanges' salon, where he sat evening after evening listening, without hearing, to her rigmaroles, her interminable anecdotes of the emigration ; while he gazed upon Claire, as a fanatic upon his idol. Often, in his ecstasy, he forgot where he was for the moment, became absolutely oblivious of the old lady's presence ; although her shrill voice was piercing the tympanum of his ear, as a needle goes through cloth. Suddenly recalled to consciousness, he answered her at cross-purposes, committing the most singular blunders, which he laboured afterwards to explain. But this did not much impede the conversation. Madame d'Arlanges did not perceive her courtier's absence of mind ; and her questions were of such a length, and succeeded each other so rapidly, that the answers were of little consequence. Having a listener, she was satisfied, provided that from time to time he gave signs of life.

When obliged to sit down to piquet, he cursed below his breath the game and its detestable inventor. He paid no attention to his cards. He made mistakes every moment, dealt without seeing, and forgot to cut. The old dame was annoyed by these continual distractions ; but she did not scruple to profit by them. She watched the deal, rectified all mistakes ; while she counted audaciously points she never made, and pocketed his money without remorse.

As Daburon's timidity was extreme, and Claire was unsociable to excess, they never spoke to each other. During the entire winter, the judge did not address a direct word to the young girl ten times ; and, on these rare occasions, he had learned by heart mechanically the phrase he proposed

to repeat to her, well knowing that, without this precaution, he would be obliged to remain silent.

But at least he saw her, he breathed the same air with her, he heard her voice, whose pure and harmonious vibrations thrilled his very soul.

By constantly watching her eyes, he learned to understand all their expressions. He believed he could read in them all her thoughts, and through them look into her soul as through an open window.

" She is pleased to-day," said he to himself ; and then he was happy. At other times he thought, " She has met with some annoyance to-day " ; and immediately he became sad.

The idea of asking for her hand, many times presented itself to his imagination ; but he never dared to entertain it. Knowing, as he did, the marquise's prejudices, her devotion to titles, her dread of mésalliance, he was convinced she would reject his suit ; and he did not dare to risk the dissolution of his present happiness upon so slender a hope of success. Poor man ! he had reached the altitude of love where it feeds upon its own misery.

" Once repulsed," he thought, " the house is shut against me ; and then farewell to happiness : this life is finished for me."

Upon the other hand, the very rational thought occurred to him that some other might see Mademoiselle d'Arlanges ; seeing, love her, and in consequence, demand and perhaps obtain her.

In either case, hazarding a proposal, or hesitating still, he must certainly lose her in the end. By the commencement of spring, his mind was made up.

One fine afternoon, in the month of April, he bent his steps towards the Hôtel d'Arlanges, having truly need of more bravery than if he were a soldier about to face a battery. He, like the soldier, whispered to himself, " Victory or death ! " The marquise, who had gone out shortly after breakfast, had just returned in a terrible rage, and was uttering screams like an eagle.

This was what had taken place. She had had some work done by a neighbouring painter some eight or ten months before ; and the workman presented himself a hundred times to receive payment, without avail. Tired of this proceeding, he had summoned the high and mighty Marquise d'Arlanges before the courts.

This summons had exasperated the marquise ; but she kept the matter to herself, having decided, in her wisdom, to call upon the judge of the court himself, and request him to reprimand the insolent painter who had dared to plague her for a paltry sum of money. The result of this fine project may be guessed. The judge had been compelled to eject her from his office ; hence her fury.

M. Daburon found her in the rose-coloured boudoir in half deshabille, and complete disorder of head-dress, red as a penny, surrounded by the débris of glass and china which had fallen under her hands in the first moments of her passion. To complete her annoyance, Claire and her governess had gone out. An excited and terrified *femme de chambre* was serving the old lady with water, in the hope of calming her nerves.

She received Daburon as a messenger direct from Providence. In a little more than half an hour, she told her story, interlarded with interjections and imprecations.

" Do you comprehend this judge ? " cried she. " This must be some frantic Jacobin—some son of the furies, who washed their hands in the blood of their king. Oh, my friend, I read stupor and indignation on your visage. He has listened to the complaint of this buffoon, to whom I had given the means of living, by employing him. And when I waited upon him in his office, and addressed to him, as I owed it to myself to do, some severe remonstrances, he actually turned me out of the room ! Me ! turned me out ! "

At this painful recollection, she made a fierce gesture with her arms. In her sudden movement, she struck a superb flacon, which the *femme de chambre* was holding. The blow dashed it to pieces against the wall of the boudoir.

" Stupid, awkward fool ! " she cried, turning her anger upon the frightened girl.

Daburon, stunned at first, now endeavoured to calm her exasperation. She did not allow him to pronounce three words.

" Happily you are here," she continued. " I have told you all. I count upon you ! You will exercise your influence, your powerful friends, your credit, to have this pitiful painter and this miscreant of a judge flung into some deep ditch, to teach them the respect due to a woman of my rank."

The magistrate did not permit himself even to smile at this imperative demand. He had heard many speeches as absurd issue from her lips without daring to perceive their

absurdity. Was she not Claire's grandmother ? For that he loved and venerated her. He blessed her for her granddaughter, as an admirer of nature blesses heaven for the wild flower that delights him with its perfume.

The fury of the old lady was terrible ; nor was it of short duration. It was able, like the anger of Achilles, to last through ten chapters. At the end of an hour, however, she was, or appeared to be, pacified. They replaced her headdress, repaired the disorder of her toilette, and picked up the fragments of broken china. Vanquished by her own violence, the reaction was immediate and complete. She fell back helpless and exhausted in the armchair.

This magnificent result was due to the magistrate. To accomplish it, he had to use all his ability, to exercise the most angelic patience, the greatest tact. His triumph was the more meritorious, because he came unprepared for this adventure, which interfered with his intended proposal. He had arrived filled with something like a resolve to speak of his wishes ; and this untoward event declared against him : but he had a good heart to oppose to misfortune.

Arming himself with his professional eloquence, he talked the old lady into calmness. He was not so foolish as to contradict her. On the contrary, he caressed her hobby. He was humorous and pathetic by turns. He attacked the authors of the revolution, cursed its errors, deplored its crimes, and reviewed its disastrous results. From the infamous Marat, by an adroit allusion he attacked the infamous judge who had offended her. He abused the scandalous conduct of the magistrate in good set terms, and was awfully severe upon the dishonest scamp of a painter. He declared that they deserved the lowest dungeon in the Bastile ; but the conclusion to which he arrived was, that the severest blow she could administer to the man's impertinence and the judge's incapacity would be to pay the bill, and compel them to give her a receipt in full for all demands.

The disconnected syllable " pay " brought Madame d'Arlanges to her feet in the fiercest attitude.

" Pay ! " she screamed. " In order that these scoundrels may persist in their obduracy ? Encourage them by a culpable weakness ? Never ! And, moreover, to pay it is necessary to have money ; and I have none ! "

" Why," said the judge, " it amounts to but eighty-seven francs ! "

" And is that nothing ? " asked the marquise. " You talk very easily, M. Daburon. It is easy to see that you have money : your ancestors were people of no rank ; and the Revolution passed a hundred feet above their heads. Who can tell whether they may not have been the gainers by it ? It has taken all from the d'Arlanges. What will they do to me, if I do not pay ? "

" Well, madame la marquise, many things—ruin you, in short : you will receive a notification from the courts. If that is not attended to, your furniture will be seized."

" Alas ! " cried the old lady, " the Revolution is not over yet. We have not passed through all its horrors ! How fortunate you are, M. Daburon, in being of the people ! I see plainly that I must pay this man ; and it is frightfully sad for me, who have nothing, and am forced to make such sacrifices for the sake of my grandchild ! "

The word " sacrifices " surprised the magistrate so strongly that involuntarily he repeated it half-aloud : " Sacrifices ? "

" Certainly ! " replied Madame d'Arlanges. " Without her, would I have to live as I am doing, refusing myself everything to make both ends meet ? Was it not for her sake I placed all that I possessed in the funds, and lost it ? But I do not consider myself. I know, thank heaven, the duties of a mother ; and I guard all mine well for my little Claire."

To this extraordinary devotion, M. Daburon had no reply to make.

" Ah, this dear child torments me terribly," continued the marquise. " I confess, M. Daburon, it makes me giddy when I think of her establishment."

The magistrate reddened with pleasure. The occasion had come at a gallop. She was turning to leave the room, when he detained her.

" It seems to me," stammered he, " that to establish Mademoiselle Claire ought to be easy."

" Unfortunately, it is anything but easy. She is pretty enough, although unpolished ; but nowadays beauty goes for nothing. Men are so mercenary they think only of money. I do not know of one who has the manhood to take a d'Arlanges with her bright eyes for a dowry."

" I believe that you exaggerate," said the magistrate timidly.

" By no means. Besides, when I find a son-in-law, he will

cause me a thousand troubles. Of this I am assured by my lawyer. I can be compelled, it seems, to render an account of Claire's patrimony. As if I ever kept accounts ! It is shameful. Ah, if Claire had any sense of filial duty she would quietly take the veil in some convent. I would use every effort to pay the necessary dower ; but she has no affection for me."

Daburon felt that the time to speak had arrived. He collected his courage, as a good horseman pulls his horse together the moment he faces the leap, and, in a voice which he tried to render firm, commenced :

" Madame, I know, I believe, just the person for Mademoiselle Claire—an honest man, who loves her, and who will do everything in the world to make her happy."

" That," said Madame d'Arlanges, " is always understood."

" The man of whom I speak," he continued, " is still young, and is rich. He will be only too happy to receive Mademoiselle Claire without dowry. Not only will he decline an examination of your accounts of guardianship, but he will supply you with means to free your own property of all encumbrance."

" *Peste !* " exclaimed the old dame ; " you are not a bad friend, M. Daburon ! "

" If you prefer to place your fortune in an annuity, your son-in-law will make good whatever deficiency remains."

" Ah, I am suffocating ! If you have known such a man, why have you not already presented him ? "

" I did not dare, madame : I was afraid."

" Quick ! tell me who is this admirable son-in-law—this white blackbird ? Where does he nestle ? "

The judge felt a strange fluttering of the heart : he was going to stake his happiness on a word. At length he stammered :

" It is I, madame ! "

His voice, his look, his suppliant gesture were ridiculous in the eyes of the old lady ; and she laughed till the tears came. He, frightened at his own audacity, stunned at having vanquished his timidity, was on the point of falling at her feet. At last, raising her shoulders, she cried :

" My dear Daburon, you are too ridiculous ! In good truth, you will make me die of laughing."

But suddenly, in the very height of her merriment, she stopped, and assumed her most dignified air.

" Are you perfectly serious in all you have told me, M. Daburon ? "

" I have stated the truth."

" You are very rich, then ? "

" I have, madame, in right of my mother, about twenty thousand livres a year. One of my uncles died about a year ago, leaving me a hundred thousand crowns. My father is worth not less than a million. Were I to ask him for the half to-morrow, he would give it to me. He would give me all his fortune, if it were necessary to my happiness, and be but too well contented should I relieve him of its administration."

Madame d'Arlanges made a sign to him to be silent ; and for five good minutes at least she remained plunged in reflection, her forehead resting in her hands. At length she raised her head.

" Hear me," she said. " Had you been so hardy as to make this proposal to Claire's father, he would have called his servants to show you the door ; but I am old and desolate. I am poor. My grandchild's prospects disquiet me ; and that is my excuse for not acting in like manner. I cannot, however, consent to speak to Claire of this horrible mésalliance. This much I can promise you, and it is much ; I will not be against you. Take your own measures. Pay your addresses to Mademoiselle d'Arlanges. Let her decide. If she says ' yes,' I shall not say ' no.' "

Daburon, transported with happiness, would have embraced the old lady, if he dared. He never dreamed of the facility with which this fierce soul had been brought to yield. He was delirious.

" Wait ! " said the old lady ; " your cause is not yet gained. Your mother, it is true, was a Cottevise ; and I must excuse her for marrying so wretchedly : but your father is Sieur Daburon. This name, my dear friend, is simply ridiculous. Do you think it will be possible to wrap up in Daburon a young girl who for eighteen years has been called d'Arlanges ? "

This objection did not seem to trouble the judge.

" After all," continued the old lady, " your father has gained a Cottevise : you may win a d'Arlanges ; and, on the strength of an alliance with the daughter of a house whose nobility has descended from sire to son for so many generations, the Daburons may end by being ennobled. Who knows ? One last advice : you believe Claire to be just as she

looks—timid, sweet, obedient. Undeceive yourself, my friend. With her saintly air and delicate touch, she is hardy, fierce, and obstinate as the marquis her father was, who resembled a mule of Auvergne. You see, I forewarn you. Our conditions are agreed to, are they not? Let us say no more on the subject. I wish you every success."

This scene was so present to his mind as he sat there at midnight in his own house in his armchair, after so long a lapse of time, that he still seemed to hear the old lady's voice; and this word "success" sounded in his ear.

He departed in triumph from the Hôtel d'Arlanges, which he had entered with a heart swelling with anxiety.

He walked with his head high, his chest dilated, breathing the air with full respirations.

He was so happy!

The grave magistrate felt a mad desire to stop the passers-by, to press them in his arms, to cry to them:

"The marquise consents!"

He walked; and the earth seemed to him to bound beneath his steps. He felt too small to contain his happiness, too light to remain on earth. He was going to fly away to the stars.

What a castle in Spain did he build upon this little word of the marquise! He tendered his resignation. He built on the banks of the Loire, not far from Tours, an enchanting little villa. He saw it smiling, with its façade to the rising sun, seated in the midst of flowers, and shaded with great trees. He furnished this dwelling as if for the reception of the queen of the fairies. He wished to provide a casket worthy the pearl he was going to possess, for he had not a dread of shipwreck, to obscure the horizon made radiant by his hopes, not a voice at the bottom of his heart raised itself to cry, "Beware!"

From this time, his visits to the marquise became more frequent. He might be said to live at her house.

While he preserved his respectful and reserved demeanour towards Claire, he strove assiduously to be something in her life. He strove to conquer his timidity, to speak to this well beloved of his soul—to converse with her, to interest her.

He went in quest of novelty, to amuse her. He read all the new books, and brought to her all that were fit for her to read.

Little by little he succeeded, thanks to the most delicate

persistence, in taming his wood-pigeon. He began to perceive that her fear of him had almost disappeared, that she no longer received him with the cold and haughty air which so long had kept him at a distance. He felt that insensibly he was advancing in her confidence. She still blushed when she spoke to him ; but she no longer hesitated to address the first word. She even ventured at times to ask him a question. She had heard a play spoken of, and wished to know the subject. M. Daburon quickly ran to see it, and committed a complete account of it to writing, which he addressed to her by mail. At times she entrusted him with trifling commissions, the execution of which he would not have exchanged for a Russian embassy.

Once he ventured to send her a magnificent bouquet. She accepted it with an air of suppressed disquietude, and begged him not to repeat the offering.

The tears came to his eyes ; and he left her presence wounded—the unhappiest of men.

But, three days after, she raised him from this despair by begging him to look for certain flowers, then very much in fashion, she wanted for her little garden. He sent enough to fill the house from the garret to the cellar.

" She loves me," he whispered to himself.

These little events, so great, had not interrupted the parties at piquet ; only the young girl now appeared interested in the game, nearly always taking part with the judge against the marquise. She did not understand the game very well ; but, when the old gambler cheated too openly, she would perceive it, and say, laughing :

" She is robbing you, M. Daburon—she is robbing you ! "

He would willingly be robbed of his entire fortune, to hear that sweet voice raised for him.

It was summer.

Often in the evening she accepted his arm ; and, while the marquise remained in the porch, seated in her armchair, they walked around the garden, treading lightly upon the paths spread with gravel, sifted so fine that the trailing of her light robe effaced the traces of their footsteps. She chatted gaily with him, as with a beloved brother ; while he was obliged to do violence to his feelings to refrain from imprinting a kiss upon the little blonde head, from which the light breeze lifted the curls and scattered them like fleecy clouds. At such moments, he seemed to tread a triumphant

path, strewn with flowers, and saw at the end happiness.

He attempted to speak of his hopes to the marquise.

" You know what we have agreed upon," she would say. " Not a word. Already the voice of conscience reproaches me with my fault in lending my countenance to this abomination. To think that I may one day have a granddaughter who calls herself Daburon ! I must petition the king, my friend, to change this name."

If, instead of intoxicating himself with dreams of happiness, this acute observer had studied the character of his idol, the effect might have been to put him upon his guard.

In the meanwhile, he remarked singular alterations in her humour. On certain days she was gay and careless as a child. Then, for a week, she would remain sombre and dejected. Seeing her in this state the day following a ball, to which her grandmother had taken her, he dared to ask her the reason of her sadness.

" Oh, that," she answered, heaving a deep sigh, " is my secret—a secret of which even my grandmother knows nothing."

Daburon looked at her. He thought he saw a tear between her long eyelashes.

" One day," she continued, " I may confide in you : it will be necessary, perhaps."

The judge was blind and deaf.

" I also," he answered, " have a secret, which I wish to confide to you in return."

When retiring after midnight, he said to himself, " To-morrow I will confess everything to her."

There passed a little more than fifty days, during which he kept repeating to himself :

" To-morrow ! "

One evening in the month of August—the heat all day had been overpowering—a breeze had risen. The leaves rustled : there were signs of a storm in the atmosphere.

They were seated together at the bottom of the garden, under the arbour, adorned with flowers which Claire had planted ; and, through the branches, they perceived the fluttering head-dress of the marquise, who was taking her accustomed walk after supper.

They had remained a long time without speaking, enjoying the perfume of the flowers, the calm beauty of the evening. Daburon had ventured to take the young girl's hand.

It was the first time ; and the touch of her slender fingers thrilled through every fibre of his frame, and drove the blood surging to his brain.

" Mademoiselle," he stammered, " Claire."

She stopped him, by turning upon him her beautiful eyes, filled with astonishment.

" Pardon me," he continued—" pardon me. I have addressed your grandmother, before venturing to speak to you. Do you not understand me, Claire ? A word from your lips decides my future happiness or misery. Claire, mademoiselle, I love you ! "

While the magistrate was speaking, the young girl looked at him as though doubtful of the evidence of her senses ; but at the words " I love you ! " pronounced with the trembling accents of passion, she disengaged her hand rudely, and uttered a stifled cry.

" You," she murmured—" is this really true ? "

M. Daburon at this, the most critical moment of his life, was powerless to utter a word. The presentiment of an immense misfortune oppressed his heart. What could he think when he saw Claire burst into a flood of tears.

She hid her face between her hands, and repeated :

" I am very unhappy, very unhappy ! "

" You unhappy ? " cried the magistrate. " And through me, Claire ? You are cruel ! In heaven's name, what have I done ? What is the matter ? Speak ! Anything rather than this anxiety, which is killing me ! "

He knelt before her on the gravelled walk, and made an attempt to again take her hand. She repulsed him with an imploring gesture.

" Let me weep," she said ; " you are going to hate me. I feel it. Who knows, to despise me, perhaps ? And yet I swear before heaven that I was ignorant of what you have just said to me, that I had not even a suspicion of it ! "

Daburon remained upon his knees, awaiting his doom.

" Yes," continued Claire, " you will think you have been the victim of a detestable coquetry. I see it now ! I comprehend everything ! Is it possible that, without a profound love, a man cannot be all that you have been to me ? Alas ! I was deceived. I gave myself up to the great happiness of having a friend ! Am I not alone in the world, as if lost in a desert ? Mad and imprudent, I devoted myself to you without reflection, as to the most indulgent of fathers."

These words revealed to the unfortunate judge a complete understanding of his error. As a hammer of steel it smashed into a thousand fragments the fragile edifice of his hopes. He raised himself slowly ; and, in a tone of involuntary reproach, he repeated :

" Your father ! "

The young girl felt how deeply she had wounded him ; but she did not know the intense depth of his love.

" Yes," she repeated, " a father ! Seeing you so grave and austere, so good, so indulgent for me, I thanked heaven for sending me a protector to replace the father I have lost."

Daburon could not restrain a sob ; his heart was breaking.

" One word," continued Claire—" one single word, would have enlightened me. That word, until to-night, you have never pronounced. And with what comfort I have leaned upon you, as a child on its mother ; with what inward joy I have said to myself, ' I am sure of one friend—one heart into which runs the overflow of mine.' Ah ! why was not my confidence greater ? Why have I withheld my secret from you ? I would have avoided this fearful calamity. I ought to have long since told what I must tell you now. I belong not to myself, but to another, to whom I have freely and with happiness given my life."

To hover in the clouds, and suddenly be cast rudely to the earth. His sufferings are not to be described.

" Better had I had the courage to speak long since," he answered ; " yet, no : I owe to silence six months of delicious illusions—six months of enchanting dreams. This shall be my share of life's happiness."

The last beams of closing day permitted the magistrate again to see Mademoiselle d'Arlanges. Her beautiful face was blanched to a deathlike whiteness, and was immovable in its expression as marble. Large tears rolled down her cheeks. Daburon seemed to contemplate the frightful spectacle of a weeping statue.

" You love another," said he at length—" another ? and your grandmother is ignorant ? Claire, you cannot have chosen a man unworthy of your love ? How is it your grandmother does not receive him ? "

" There are certain obstacles," murmured Claire—" obstacles which perhaps we may never be able to remove ; but I can love only once. I shall marry he whom I love, or remain with heaven ! "

" Certain obstacles," said Daburon in a hollow voice. " You love a man : he knows it ; and he meets with obstacles ? "

" I am poor," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlanges ; " and his family is immensely rich. His father is cruel, inexorable."

" His father," cried the magistrate, with a bitterness he did not dream of hiding—" his father, his family ; and that withholds him ? You are poor : he is rich ; and that stops him, and he knows you love him ? Ah ! why aren't I in his place ; and why haven't I the entire universe against me ? What sacrifice could compare with love like mine ? Would it be a sacrifice ? What might appear so to others, to me would be simply joy. Suffer, struggle, wait, so long as hope remains ; that is to love."

" It is thus I love," said Claire with simplicity.

This answer crushed the judge. He understood that for him there was no hope ; but he felt a terrible enjoyment in plumbing the depth of his misfortune.

" But," he insisted, " how have you known him, spoken to him ? Where ? When ? Madame d'Arlanges receives no one."

" I will tell you everything," she answered in a decided tone. " It is a long time since I have known him. It was at the house of one of my grandmother's friends, who was a cousin of his—old Mademoiselle Goello—that I saw him for the first time. There we first met ; there we meet each other now."

" Ah ! " cried Daburon, as to himself, " I remember now. A few days before your visit to Mademoiselle Goello, you are gayer than usual ; and, when you return, you are often sad."

" That is because I see how much he is pained by the obstacles he cannot overcome."

" His family is, then, so illustrious," he said, " that it disdains alliance with yours ? "

" You shall know everything, without question, monsieur," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlanges. " His name is Albert de Commarin."

The marquise, at this moment, thinking she had walked enough, prepared to regain her rose-coloured boudoir. She approached the arbour.

" Incorruptible magistrate ! " she said, in her great voice, " the table is set for piquet."

Mechanically the magistrate arose, stammering, " I am coming."

Claire held his arm.

" I have not asked you to be secret, monsieur," she said.

" Oh, mademoiselle ! " said Daburon, wounded by this appearance of doubt.

" I know," said Claire, " that I can count upon you ; but, come what will, my tranquillity is lost."

Daburon regarded her with an air of surprise ; his eye questioned her.

" It is certain," she said, answering the look, " that what I, a young and inexperienced girl, have failed to see has not been unnoticed by my grandmother. That she has continued to receive you is a tacit encouragement of your addresses ; which I consider, permit me to say, as very honourable to me."

" I have already mentioned, mademoiselle, that the marquise has deigned to authorise my hopes."

And briefly he related his interview with Madame d'Arlanges, having the delicacy to omit absolutely the question of money, which had so strongly influenced the old lady.

" I see very plainly what effect this will have on my peace," she said sadly, " when she learns that I have not received your homage."

" You do not know me, mademoiselle," said he. " I have nothing to say to the marquise. I will retire ; and all will be concluded."

" Oh, you are good and generous, I know ! "

" I will go away," continued Daburon ; " and soon you will have forgotten even the name of the poor fellow whose life is broken."

" You do not mean what you say ? " asked the young girl quickly.

" Well, no. I will flatter myself with a hope, that, later, my remembrance will not be without pleasure to you. Sometime you will say, ' He loved me,' and think of me as a friend—your most devoted friend."

Claire, in her turn, took his hands with emotion within her own.

" Yes," she said ; " you must remain my friend. Let us forget what has happened—what you have said to-night—and remain to me, as in the past, the best, the most indulgent of brothers."

The darkness had come, and she could not see him ; but she knew he was weeping, for he was slow to answer.

" Is it possible," he said at length, " that you can ask that ? Do you, who talk to me of forgetting, feel the power to forget ? Do you not know that I love you a thousand times more than you love——"

He stopped, unable to pronounce the name of Commarin ; and then, with an effort, he added, " and I shall love you always."

He had left the arbour, and was now on the steps of the porch.

" And now, mademoiselle, adieu ! You will see me again rarely. I shall only return often enough to avoid the appearance of a rupture."

His voice trembled, so that with difficulty he made it distinct.

" Whatever may come in the future," he added, " remember that there is one person in the world who belongs to you absolutely. If ever you have need of a friend's devotion, come to me, come to your friend. Let me go. It is over. I have courage, Claire. Mademoiselle, for the last time, adieu !"

She was little less dismayed than he was. Instinctively she advanced her head ; and M. Daburon touched lightly with his cold lips, for the first and last time, the forehead of her he loved so well.

They mounted the steps, she leaning on his arm, and entered the rose-coloured boudoir where the marquise was seated, impatiently shuffling the cards, awaiting her victim.

" Now, then, incorruptible judge," she cried.

But Daburon felt sick at heart. He could not have held the cards. He stammered some absurd excuses, spoke of pressing affairs, of duties to be attended to, of unexpected news, and left the house.

His departure made the old card-player indignant. She turned to her granddaughter, who was endeavouring to hide her confusion behind the wax candles of the card-table, and demanded :

" What has happened to M. Daburon this evening ? "

" I do not know, madame," stammered Claire.

" It appears to me," continued the marquise, " that the little judge permits himself to take singular liberties. He must be reminded of his proper place, or he will finish by believing himself our equal."

Claire essayed to justify the magistrate.

" He has been complaining all the evening, grandmamma ; may he not be sick ? "

" What if he should be ? " exclaimed the old lady. " Is it not his duty to exercise some self-denial, in return for the honour of our company ? I think I have already related to you the story of your grand-uncle, the Duke de St. Hurluge, who, having attended the king's hunting party, on their return from the chase lost with the best grace in the world two hundred and twenty pistoles. All the assembly remarked on his gaiety and his good humour. The following day it was learned, that, during the chase, he had fallen from his horse, and had sat at his majesty's card-table with a broken rib, rather than mar the enjoyment of the company by a complaint. Nobody made any loud comments, so perfectly natural did an act of ordinary politeness appear in those days. This little judge, if he is sick, should have given proof of his breeding by saying nothing about it, and remaining for my piquet. But he is as well as I am. Who can tell what games he has gone to play elsewhere ? "

CHAPTER VII

Daburon did not return home on leaving the Hôtel d'Arlanges. All the night he wandered at random, seeking a little coolness for his burning head, a little calm for his overloaded and bursting heart.

" Fool that I was," he cried to himself. " Thousand times fool to have hoped, to have believed, that she would ever love me. Idiot ! how could I have dreamed of possessing so much grace, nobleness, and beauty ! How charming she was this evening, when her face was wet with tears. Could anything be more angelic ? What a sublime expression her eyes had in speaking of him ! How she must love him ! And I ? She loves me as a father. She told me so—as a father. And could it be otherwise ? Is it not justice ? Ought she to see a lover in this sombre magistrate, always as sad as his black costume ? Was it not a crime to dream of uniting that virginal simplicity to my detestable worldly science ? For her, the future is yet the land of smiling chimeras ; and long since experience has dissipated all my illusions. She is as young as Innocence : I am as old as Vice."

The unfortunate magistrate made himself veritably a horror. He understood Claire, and he excused her. He even wished he could himself suffer the sadness he had brought upon her. He reproached himself with having cast a shadow upon her life. He could not forgive himself for having spoken of his love. Ought he not to have foreseen what had happened—that she would refuse him, that he would thus deprive himself of the happiness of seeing her, of hearing her, of silently adoring her ?

"A young and romantic girl," his thoughts ran on, "must have a lover she can dream of—whom she can caress in imagination, as an ideal, pleasing herself by seeing in him every great and brilliant quality, imagining him full of nobleness, of bravery, of heroism. What would she see if, in my absence, she dreamed of me ? Her imagination would present me dressed in a funeral robe, in the depth of a gloomy dungeon, engaged with some foul criminal. Is it not my trade to descend into all the moral sinks, to stir up the foulness of crime ? Am I not compelled to wash in secrecy and shadow the foul linen of society ? Ah ! it is a fatal profession. Am I punished thus, because, like the priest, the judge should condemn himself to solitude and celibacy ? Both know all: they hear all, their costumes are nearly the same ; but while the priest in the fold of his black robe carries consolation, the judge carries terror. One is mercy, the other chastisement. Such are the images awakened ; while the other—the other——"

The wretched man continued his headlong course along the deserted quays.

He went with his head bare, his eyes haggard. To breathe more freely, he had torn off his cravat and hurled it away.

Sometimes, unconsciously, he crossed the path of a solitary wayfarer, who would pause, touched with pity, and turn to watch the retreating figure of the unfortunate wretch he thought deprived of reason.

In a by-road, near Grenelle, some officers stopped, and tried to question him. He mechanically tendered them his card. They read it, and permitted him to pass, convinced that he was drunk.

Anger—a furious anger, began to replace his first feeling of resignation. In his heart arose a hate, stronger and more violent than even his love for Claire.

This other, this noble viscount, who could not overcome

these paltry obstacles, oh, that he had him there, under his knee !

At this moment, this noble and proud man, this magistrate, so severe and grave, felt an irresistible longing for vengeance. He began to understand the hate that armed itself with the poniard, and lay in ambush in dark corners ; which struck in the darkness, whether in the face or in the back, it mattered little, but which struck, which killed—whose vengeance blood alone could satisfy.

At this very hour, he was charged with the conduct of an inquiry into the case of an unfortunate young girl, accused of having stabbed one of her wretched companions.

She was jealous of this woman, who had tried to take her lover from her. He was a soldier, very fat and very ugly.

Daburon felt himself filled with pity for this miserable creature, whom he had begun to examine the day previous.

She was very ugly—truly repulsive ; but the expression of her eyes, when speaking of her soldier, returned to the memory of the judge.

" She loved him truly," he thought. " If each one of her jurors could suffer what I am suffering now, she would be acquitted. But how many men have had a passion in their lives ? Perhaps not one in twenty."

He resolved to recommend this girl to the indulgence of the court, and extenuate as much as he could the punishment of her crime.

He had himself resolved upon the commission of a crime.

He was resolved to kill Albert de Commarin.

The rest of that night, he confirmed himself in this resolution, demonstrating by a thousand mad reasons, which he found solid and inscrutable, the necessity and rightness of this vengeance.

At seven o'clock in the morning he found himself in an alley of the Bois de Boulogne, not far from the lake. He gained the Maillot gate, called a carriage, and was driven to his house.

The delirium of the night continued, but without suffering. He was conscious of no fatigue—calm and cool apparently, but under the empire of an hallucination—in a state approaching somnambulism.

He reflected and reasoned, but without reason.

He dressed himself with care, as was his custom formerly when visiting the Marquise d'Arlanges, and went out.

He first called on a gunsmith, and bought a small revolver, which he had carefully loaded under his own eyes, and put into his pocket. He waylaid persons who could tell him to what club the viscount belonged. No one perceived the strange situation of his mind, so natural were his manners and conversation.

It was not until the afternoon that he found a young friend, a member of Albert de Commarin's club, who offered to conduct him thither and present him.

Daburon accepted warmly, and accompanied his friend. As they went, he grasped with frenzy the handle of the revolver, which he kept concealed, thinking only of the murder he was determined to commit, and the means of ensuring the accuracy of his aim.

" This will make," he thought, " a terrible scandal ; above all, if I do not succeed. Well, if I fail, I shall go mad. They will arrest me—throw me into prison. I shall be placed upon trial at the court of assize, my name dishonoured ! Well ! what does that matter to me ? I am not loved by Claire. What is all the rest ? My father without doubt will die of grief ; but *I must be revenged.*"

Arrived at the club, his friend pointed out to him a very distinguished-looking young man, brown complexioned, with a haughty air, or what appeared so to him, who, seated at a table, was reading a review. It was the viscount.

Daburon marched upon him without drawing his revolver. Arrived within two paces, his heart failed him : he turned suddenly and fled, leaving his friend astonished at a scene to him utterly inexplicable. Albert de Commarin was to be as near death but once again !

When he reached the street, Daburon felt the ground flying beneath his feet—everything turning around him. He tried, but was unable to cry out : he struck at the air with his hands, reeled an instant, and then fell helpless on the pavement.

The passers-by ran and assisted the police to raise him. In one of his pockets they found his address, and carried him to his house. When he recovered his senses, he lay upon his bed, at the foot of which stood his father.

" What has taken place ? " he asked. With much caution they told him, that for six weeks he had wavered between life and death. The doctors had declared his life saved ; and, now that reason was restored, all would go well.

Five minutes' conversation exhausted him. He shut his eyes, and tried to collect his ideas ; but they whirled hither and thither wildly, as autumn leaves in the wind. The past seemed shrouded in a dark mist ; yet, in the midst of all the darkness and confusion, the memory of his scene with Mademoiselle d'Arlanges stood out before his mental vision clear and luminous. All his actions up to the moment when he embraced Claire were marked, as in a brightly painted picture. He trembled ; and his hair was in a moment damp with perspiration.

He had failed to become a murderer.

The proof that he was restored to full possession of his faculties was that a question of criminal law crossed his brain.

" The crime committed," he said to himself. " Should I have been condemned ? Yes. Was I responsible ? No. Would an action committed in a state of mental alienation be a crime ? Was I mad ? Or was I in a peculiar state of mind which always precedes an illegal attempt ? Who can answer ? Why have not all judges passed through an incomprehensible crisis such as mine ? Who would believe me, were I to recount my experience ? "

Some days later, he was sufficiently recovered to tell his father all. The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders, and assured him it was but a reminiscence of his delirium.

The good old man was moved at the story of his son's luckless wooing, without seeing therein an irreparable misfortune. He advised him to think of something else, placed at his disposal his entire fortune, and recommended him to marry a stout Poitevine heiress, very pretty and good humoured, who would make him an excellent wife. Then, as his farm was suffering by his absence, the good man returned to his province. Two months later, Daburon had resumed his ordinary avocations. But it was hard work. He went through his duties like a body without a soul. He felt that his heart was broken.

Once he ventured to pay a visit to his old friend, the marquise. On seeing him, she uttered a cry of terror. She took him for a spectre, so much was he changed in appearance.

As she dreaded dismal figures, she shut herself away from him in the future.

Claire was sick for a week after seeing him. " How he loved me ! " thought she. " He has almost died for me ! Does Albert love me as much ? "

She did not dare to answer herself. She felt a desire to console him, to speak to him, attempt something ; but he came no more.

Daburon was not, however, a man to be overthrown without a struggle. He tried, as his father advised him, to distract his thoughts. He sought for pleasure, and found disgust, but not forgetfulness. Often he went so far as the threshold of dissipation ; always the pure figure of Claire, dressed in white garments, barred the doors against him.

Then he took refuge in work, as in a sanctuary ; condemned himself to the most incessant labour, forbade himself to think of Claire, as the consumptive forbids himself to recollect his malady.

His asperity in his labour, his feverish activity, was worth the reputation of an ambitious man ; but he took no real interest in anything.

At length, though he found no rest, this engrossing occupation exempted him from the sorrow which commonly follows a great catastrophe. The convalescence of oblivion commenced.

These were the events recalled to Daburon by Père Tabaret by the name of Commarin. He believed them buried under the ashes of time ; and they came up, as those characters traced in invisible ink appear when held before a fire, on apparently blank paper. In an instant they unrolled themselves before his memory, with the instantaneousness of a dream, annihilating time and space.

For some minutes he assisted at the representation of his own life. At once actor and spectator, he was there seated in his armchair ; and he appeared to himself as in a theatre. He acted, and he judged himself.

His first thought, it must be confessed, was one of hate, followed by a detestable sentiment of satisfaction. Chance had delivered to him this man preferred by Claire—this man no longer a haughty gentleman, illustrious by his fortune and his ancestors, but an illegitimate offspring of a *femme couvert*. To guard a stolen name, he had committed a most cowardly assassination. And he, the judge, was to experience the infinite gratification of striking his enemy with the sword of justice.

But this was only a passing thought. The conscience of the man revolted against it, and made its powerful voice heard above the whispers of selfishness.

"Is anything," it cried, "more monstrous than the association of these two ideas—hatred and justice? A judge—can he, without despising himself more than the vile beings he condemns, remind himself that a criminal whose fate is in his hands has been his enemy? Has he a right to sit in judgment on a man against whom he harbours in his heart one drop of gall?"

Daburon repeated to himself many times during the year, on commencing an inquiry:

"And I also—I almost stained myself with dreadful murder!"

And now observe what he was about to do—to arrest, interrogate, and hand over to the court of assize the man he had once had the firm determination to kill.

All the world, it is true, ignores the crime of thought and intention; but could he himself forget it? Was not this, above all others, a case for him not to touch? Ought he not to withdraw, and wash his hands of bloodshed, leaving to another the care of avenging society?

"No," said he, "it would be a cowardice unworthy of me."

A project of mad generosity came to him. "If I save him," murmured he, "if for sake of Claire I leave him his honour and his life—but how can I save him?—I shall be obliged to suppress Père Tabaret's testimony, and impose upon him the complicity of silence. It will be necessary to make him voluntarily take a false road, and run with Gevrol after a chimerical murderer. Is this practicable? On the other hand, to spare Albert is to defame Noel; it is to assure impunity to the most odious of crimes. It is to sacrifice human justice to human feeling."

The magistrate suffered.

How to choose a path in the midst of so many perplexities! Dragged each way by different interests, he wavered, undecided, between conflicting determinations, his mind oscillating from one extreme to the other.

What to do? His reason, after this new and unforeseen shock, vainly sought to regain its equilibrium.

"Retreat?" said he to himself. "Where, then, is my courage? Ought I not rather to remain the representative of the law, incapable of emotion, insensible to prejudice? Am I so feeble that, in assuming my rôle, I am unable to divest myself of my personality? Can I not, for the present,

forget the past? My duty is to pursue this inquiry. Claire herself would order me to act thus. Would she desire to wed a man soiled by suspicion of a crime? Never. For Claire's sake, then, I will go on; that, if innocent, he may be restored to her, and, if guilty, she may be delivered from all further contact with a man so unworthy of her pure affection."

This was very strong reasoning; but, at the bottom of his heart, a thousand disquietudes darted their thorns. He wanted something more to reassure him.

"Do I still hate this young man?" he continued. "No, certainly. If Claire has preferred him to me, it is to Claire and not him I owe my suffering. My fury was no more than a passing fit of delirium. I will prove it, by letting him find in me as much of counsellor as judge. If he is not guilty, he will dispose of all this formidable array of evidence, placed by Père Tabaret in the hands of justice, by establishing counter-proofs of his innocence. Yes, I am able to be his judge. Heaven, who reads the thoughts of all hearts, sees that I love Claire enough to wish with all my heart the innocence of her lover."

At this moment, M. Daburon remembered vaguely the lapse of time.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning.

"Goodness!" he cried, "and Père Tabaret is waiting for me. I shall find him asleep."

But Père Tabaret was not asleep. He had felt the passage of time no more than the judge.

Ten minutes had sufficed him to take an inventory of the contents of Daburon's study; which was large, and of a severe magnificence, altogether in accordance with the position and large fortune of the magistrate. Armed with a lamp, he approached six very handsome pictures, which broke the monotony of the wainscoting, and admired them. He examined curiously some rare bronzes, placed upon the chimney-piece, and a console. He gave the book-case the glance of a connoisseur.

After which, taking an evening paper from the table, he approached the hearth, and plunged into a vast armchair.

He had not read the third part of the leading article —which, like all the leading articles of the time, interested itself exclusively with the Roman question—when, letting the paper drop from his hands, he became absorbed in meditation. The fixed idea, stronger than his will, and more

interesting to him than politics, carried him to Jonchère, where the murdered Widow Lerouge lay. Like the child who builds up and throws down again and again his house of cards, he rearranged and scattered alternately his series of inductions and evidence.

Certainly there was nothing doubtful or questionable in the evidence. He knew all from A to Z. He knew what his own impressions had been, on hearing Noel's revelations ; and Daburon, he saw, shared his opinions. What difficulty remained ?

There is between the judge of inquiry and the accused a supreme tribunal—an admirable institution, a powerful moderator—the jury.

The jury, thank heaven ! does not content itself with a moral conviction. The strongest probabilities cannot draw from them an affirmative verdict.

Placed upon a neutral ground, between the prosecution and the defence, it demands material and tangible proofs. Where the magistrate would condemn twenty times for one, in all security of conscience, the jury acquit for lack of satisfying evidence.

The deplorable execution of Lesurques has certainly assured impunity to many criminals ; but it is necessary to say it justifies hesitation in receiving circumstantial evidence in capital crimes.

In short, save where a criminal is taken in the very act, or confesses his guilt, it is not certain that the Minister of Justice can secure a conviction. Sometimes the magistrate is as anxious as the accused himself. Nearly all crimes are in some particular point mysterious, perhaps impenetrable to justice and the police ; and the duty of the advocate is to discover this weak point, and thereon establish his client's defence. By pointing out this doubt to the jury, he insinuates in their minds a distrust of the entire evidence ; and frequently the detection of a distorted induction, cleverly exposed, can change the face of a prosecution, and make a strong case appear to the jury a weak one. This uncertainty explains the passion which is so often perceptible in criminal trials.

And, in proportion to the march of civilisation, juries in important trials will become more timid and hesitating. The weight of responsibility oppresses the man of conscientious scruple. Already numbers recoil from the idea of capital punishment ; and, whenever a jury can find a peg

to hang a doubt on, they will wash their hands of the responsibility of condemnation. We have seen numbers of persons signing appeals for mercy to a condemned malefactor, condemned for what crime ? Parricide ! Every juror, from the moment he is sworn, weighs infinitely less the evidence he has come to listen to than the risk he runs of incurring the pangs of remorse. Rather than risk the condemnation of one innocent man, he will allow twenty scoundrels to go unpunished.

The accusation must, then, come before the jury, armed at all points, with both hands full of proofs. A task often tedious to the judge of inquiry, and bristling with difficulties, is the arrangement and condensation of this evidence, particularly when the accused is a miscreant of strength and coolness, certain of having left no traces of his guilt. Then, from the depths of his dungeon, he defies the assault of justice, and laughs at the judge of inquiry. It is a terrible struggle, enough to make one tremble at the responsibility of the magistrate, when he remembers that, after all, this man imprisoned, without consolation or advice, may be innocent. How hard is it, then, for the judge to resist his moral convictions !

Even when presumptive evidence points clearly to the criminal, and common sense recognises him, Justice is at times compelled to acknowledge her defeat, for lack of what the jury consider sufficient proof of guilt.

Thus, unhappily, many crimes escape punishment. An old advocate-general one day confessed that he knew as many as three assassins, living rich, happy, and respected, who, except from some improbable accidents, would end by dying in their beds, surrounded by their families, being followed to the grave with lamentations, and praised for their virtues in their epitaphs.

At the idea that a murderer should escape the penalty of his crime, steal himself away from the very court of assize, Père Tabaret's blood fairly boiled in his veins, as at the recollection of a cruel personal injury.

Such a monstrous event, in his opinion, could only proceed from the incapacity of the magistrates charged with the prosecution, the maladdress of the police, or the stupidity of the judge of inquiry.

" It is not I," he muttered, with the satisfied vanity of success, " who ever let my prey escape. No crime can be

committed of which the author cannot be found unless he happens to be a madman ; in which event, his escape is reasonable. I would pass my life in pursuit of a criminal, before avowing myself vanquished, as this Gevrol has done so many times."

This time again, Père Tabaret, assisted by chance, had succeeded, he repeated to himself ; but what proofs of innocence would the defence present to this accursed jury—this jury, so difficult to convince, so formal and so cowardly. Who could imagine what means might not be found by a strong man, perfectly on his guard, covered by his position, and without doubt by cunning precautions ? What trap had he prepared ? To what new and infallible stratagem had he had recourse ?

The amateur detective exhausted himself in subtle but impracticable combinations, always stopped by this fatal jury, so obnoxious to the great men of the Rue Jerusalem.

He was so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the door open, and continued his reflections unconscious of the judge's presence.

Daburon's voice aroused him from his reverie.

" You will excuse me, M. Tabaret, for having left you so long alone."

The old fellow rose and made a respectful salutation at an angle of forty-five degrees.

" By my faith, monsieur," replied he, " I have not had the leisure to perceive my solitude."

Daburon crossed the room, and seated himself, facing Tabaret, before a small table encumbered with papers and documents relating to the crime. He appeared very much fatigued.

" I have reflected a good deal," he commenced, " on all this affair——"

" And I," interrupted Père Tabaret, " was just asking myself, monsieur, what was likely to be the attitude assumed by the viscount at the moment of his arrest. Nothing is more important, according to my theory, than his manner of conducting himself then. Will he attempt to intimidate the agents ? Will he threaten them with expulsion from the house ? These are generally the tactics of titled criminals. My opinion, however, is, that he will remain perfectly cool. This conclusion is logical. It is the character of the perpetrator of the crime to treat the ministers of justice with a

superb assurance. He will declare himself the victim of a misunderstanding, and insist upon an immediate interview with the magistrate. Once that is accorded to him, he will finish by explaining everything very quickly."

The old fellow spoke of matters of speculation in such a tone of assurance that Daburon was unable to repress a smile.

"We have not got as far as that yet," said he.

"But we shall, in some hours," replied Tabaret quickly. "I presume you will order the criminal's arrest at daybreak."

Daburon trembled, as the patient trembles who sees the surgeon, on entering, deposit his case of instruments upon the table.

The moment for action had come. He felt now what a distance lies between a mental decision and the physical action resulting therefrom.

"You are prompt, M. Tabaret," said he; "you recognise no obstacles."

"None, having ascertained the criminal. Who else can have committed this assassination? Who but he had an interest in silencing the Widow Lerouge, in suppressing her testimony, in destroying her papers? Poor Noel, who is so simple and honest, has been forestalled by this wretch, who stops at nothing. Noel has instituted proceedings to recover his title and estates. Should the guilt of the assassin fail to be established, he will remain de Cammarin more than ever; and my young advocate will be Noel Gerdy to the grave."

"Yes, but——"

The amateur fixed upon the judge a look of astonishment.

"You see, then, some difficulties, monsieur?" he demanded.

"Yes!" replied Daburon. "This is a matter demanding the utmost circumspection. In cases like the present, we must not strike until the blow is sure; and we have but presumptions. We must not deceive ourselves. Justice, unhappily, cannot repair her errors. Her hand once placed upon a man, even if unjustly, leaves an imprint of dishonour that can never be effaced. She may perceive her error, and proclaim it aloud; but in vain. Public opinion—absurd, idiotic opinion—never pardons the man guilty of the crime of being suspected."

It was with a sinking heart the old fellow heard these

remarks. He would not be the man to be withheld by such mean considerations.

" Our suspicions are well grounded," continued the magistrate. " But, should they lead us into error, our precipitation would be a terrible misfortune for this young man, to say nothing of the effect it would have in abridging the authority and dignity of Justice, of weakening the respect which constitutes her power. Such a mistake would call for discussion, provoke examination, and awaken distrust, at an epoch in our history when all minds are only too much disposed to defy the constituted authorities."

He leaned upon the table, and appeared to reflect profoundly.

" No chance," thought Père Tabaret. " I have to do with a trembler. When he should act, he makes speeches ; instead of signing mandates, he propounds theories. He is stunned by my discovery, and is not equal to the situation. Instead of being delighted by my appearance with the news of our success, he would have given a louis, I dare say, to have been left to slumber undisturbed in thick ignorance. Ah, he would very willingly have the little fishes in his net ; but the big ones frighten him : the big fish are dangerous ; and he lets them swim away."

" Perhaps," said Daburon in a loud tone, " it will suffice to issue a mandate of inquiry, and another of requisition for the appearance of the accused."

" Then all is lost ! " cried Père Tabaret.

" And why, if you please ? "

" Monsieur, we are opposed by a criminal of marked ability. The crime has been executed with the most subtle premeditation. A most providential accident alone, almost a miracle, has placed us upon the track of discovery. If we give him time to breathe, he will escape."

The only answer was an inclination of the head ; which Daburon might have intended for a sign of assent.

" It is evident," continued the old fellow, " that our adversary has foreseen everything, absolutely everything, except the possibility of suspicion attaching to one in his high position. Oh, his precautions are all taken. If you are satisfied with demanding his appearance, he is saved. He will enter your cabinet of inquiry as tranquilly as your clerk, as unconcerned as if he came to arrange the preliminaries of a duel. He will present you with a magnificent

alibi, an alibi that cannot be gainsaid. He will show you that he passed the evening and the night of Tuesday with personages of the highest rank. He has dined with the Count de Machin, gamed with the Marquis of so and so, and supped with the Duke of what's his name. The Baroness of this and the Viscountess of that have not lost sight of him for a minute. In short, his little machine will be so cleverly constructed, so nicely arranged, all its little wheels will play so well, that there will be nothing left for you but to open the door and usher him out with the most humble apologies. The only means of securing conviction is to surprise the miscreant by a rapidity against which it is impossible he can be on guard. Fall upon him like a thunderclap, arrest him as he awakes, drag him hither while yet pale with astonishment, and interrogate at once."

Père Tabaret stopped short, frightened at the idea that he had been wanting in respect ; but Daburon showed no sign of being offended.

" Proceed," he said, in a tone of encouragement, " proceed."

" Then," continued the old fellow, " I am a magistrate. I have my man arrested ; and, twenty minutes later, he is standing before me. I do not amuse myself by putting questions to him, more or less subtle. No, I go right to the mark. I overwhelm him at once by the weight of my certainty, prove to him so clearly that I know everything, that he must surrender, seeing no chance of escape. I should say to him, ' My good man, you bring me an alibi ; it is very well : but we are acquainted with this system of defence. It will not do with me. Of course I understand you have been elsewhere at the hour of the crime ; a hundred persons have never lost sight of you. It is all admitted. In the meantime, here is what you have done. At twenty minutes after eight, you slipped away adroitly ; at thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at Rue St. Lazare ; at nine o'clock, you descended at the station at Rueil, and took the road to Jonchère ; at a quarter past nine, you knocked at the window-shutter of the Widow Lerouge's cottage. You were admitted. You asked for something to eat, and, above all, something to drink. At twenty minutes past nine, you planted the end of a foil, well-sharpened, between her shoulders. You killed her ! You then overturned everything in the house, and burned certain

papers of importance ; after which, you tied in a napkin all the valuables you could find, and carried them off, to lead the police to believe the murder was the work of a robber. You locked the door, and threw away the key.

" ' Arrived at the Seine, you threw the bundle into the water, and then regained the railway station on foot ; and, at eleven o'clock, you reappeared in the company, where your absence was unnoticed. Your game was well played ; but you omitted to provide against two adversaries : a detective, not easily deceived, named Tirauclair, and another still more capable, named Chance.

" ' Between the two, they made you lose the game. Moreover, you were wrong to wear fine boots, and to keep on your pearl grey gloves, besides embarrassing yourself with a silk hat and an umbrella. Now confess your guilt, and save the trouble of a trial ; and I will give you permission to smoke in your dungeon some of those Trabucos you are so fond of, and which you smoke always with an amber mouth-piece.' "

During this speech, delivered with extraordinary volubility, Père Tabaret had gained a couple of inches in height, so great was his enthusiasm. He looked at the magistrate, as if requesting a smile of approval.

" Yes," he continued, after taking breath, " I would say this, and nothing else ; and, unless this man is a hundred times stronger than I suppose him to be, unless he is made of bronze, of marble, or of steel, he would fall at my feet and avow his guilt."

" And then if he were of bronze," said Daburon, " and did not fall at your feet, what would you do next ? "

The question evidently embarrassed the old fellow.

" Pshaw ! " stammered he ; " I don't know ; I should see. I would search. But he would confess."

After a prolonged silence, Daburon took a pen, and wrote in haste.

" I surrender," said he. " M. Albert de Commarin shall be arrested. It is decided ; but the formalities and inquiries will occupy some time, which I wish to use by first interrogating the Count de Commarin, the young man's father, and this young advocate, your friend M. Noel Gerdy, also, in examination of the letters of which you speak ; they are indispensable to me."

At the name of Gerdy, Père Tabaret's face assumed a most comical expression of uneasiness.

" Confound it," he cried, " the very thing I have most dreaded."

" What ? " demanded Daburon.

" The necessity for the examination of those letters. Noel will discover my interference. He will despise me : he will fly from me, when he knows that Tabaret and Tirauclair sleep in the same nightcap. Inside a week, my oldest friends will refuse to take my hand, as if it were not an honour to serve justice. I shall be obliged to change my residence, and assume a false name."

He almost wept, so great was his annoyance. Daburon was touched.

" Reassure yourself, my dear Tabaret," said he. " I will so manage that he shall know nothing. I shall lead him to believe I have reached him by means of the widow's papers."

The old fellow seized the judge's hand, in a transport of gratitude, and carried it to his lips.

" Oh, thanks, monsieur, a thousand thanks ! I beg to be permitted to witness the arrest ; and I shall be glad to assist at the examination."

" I expected you would ask it, M. Tabaret," answered the judge.

The lamps paled in the grey dawn of the morning ; the rumbling of vehicles was heard in the distance : Paris was awaking.

" I have no time to lose," continued Daburon, " if I would have all my measures well taken. I must at once see the Procureur Imperial ; awake him, if necessary. I will go from his house directly to the Palace of Justice. I shall be in my cabinet before eight o'clock ; and I desire, M. Tabaret, you will there await my orders."

The magistrate's servant appeared.

" A note, monsieur," said he, " brought by a gendarme from Bougival. He waits an answer."

" Very well," replied Daburon. " Ask the man to have some refreshment ; at least offer him a glass of wine."

He opened the envelope.

" Ah ! " he cried, " a letter from Gevrol " ; and he read :

" To the Judge of Inquiry,—I have the honour to inform you that I am on the track of the man of the ear-rings. I heard of him at a wine-shop, which he entered on Sunday morning, before going to the Widow Lerouge's cottage. He drank, and paid for, two litres of wine ; then, suddenly striking his forehead, he

cried, ' Old stupid ! to forget that to-morrow is the boat's fête day ! ' and demanded another litre of wine. I consulted the almanac ; it was the fête of St. Martin, which I therefore take to be the name of the boat. I have also learned that she was laden with grain. I write to the préfecture at the same time as I write to you, that inquiries may be made at Paris and Rouen. He must be found at one of these places.

" I am in waiting, monsieur, etc."

" Poor Gevrol ! " cried Père Tabaret, bursting with laughter. " He sharpens his sabre, and the battle is over. Are you not going to put a stop to his researches, monsieur ? "

" No ; certainly not," answered Daburon ; " to neglect the slightest clue might lead to error. Who can tell what light we may receive from this old mariner with the rings in his ears ? "

CHAPTER VIII

On the same day that the crime of Jonchère was discovered, and precisely at the hour when Père Tabaret made his memorable examination in the victim's chamber, the Viscount Albert de Commarin entered a carriage, and proceeded to the Gare du Nord, to meet his father.

The young man was very pale, his features pinched, his eyes dull, his lips blanched, his whole appearance denoting either overwhelming fatigue or unusual sorrow.

All the servants had observed that, during the past five days, their young master was not in his ordinary condition ; he spoke with effort, ate almost nothing, and forbade the admission of visitors.

His valet remarked that this singular alteration dated from the visit, on Sunday morning, of a certain M. Noel Gerdy, an advocate who had been closeted with him for three hours in the library.

The viscount, gay as a lark until the arrival of this person, had, from the moment of his departure, the appearance of a man at the point of death, or filled with remorse for the commission of a terrible crime.

At the moment of setting forth to meet his father, the viscount appeared to suffer so acutely that Lubin, his valet, entreated him not to expose himself to the cold ; it would be more prudent to retire to his room, and call in the doctor.

But the Count de Commarin, his son knew, was exacting on the score of filial duty, and would overlook the worst of youthful indiscretions sooner than what he termed a want of reverence. He had announced his intended arrival by telegraph, twenty-four hours in advance ; therefore the house was expected to be in perfect readiness to receive him : and the absence of Albert at the railway station would have been resented as a flagrant omission of duty.

The viscount had been but five minutes in the waiting-room when the bell announced the arrival of the train. Soon the doors leading to the platform were opened, and the station became filled with travellers.

The throng beginning to thin a little, the count appeared, followed by a servant, who carried a travelling pelisse lined with expensive fur.

The Count de Commarin looked a good ten years less than his age. His beard and hair, yet abundant, were scarcely grey. He was tall and muscular, held himself upright, and carried his head high—all this without any of the ungracious British manner, so much affected by our young men of the present day. His appearance was noble, his movements easy. His hands were strong and handsome—the hands of a man whose ancestors have been for centuries familiar with sword-hilts. His regular features presented a study to the physiognomist, all expressing easy, careless good nature, even to the handsome, smiling mouth ; except his eyes, in whose clear depths flashed the fiercest, most arrogant pride. This contrast revealed the secret of his character. Imbued quite as deeply with aristocratic prejudice as the Marquise d'Arlanges, he had progressed with his century, or at least appeared to have done so. As fully as the marquise he held in contempt all who were not noble ; but his disdain expressed itself in different fashion. The marquise proclaimed her contempt loudly and coarsely ; the count dissimulated, beneath an excess of politeness humiliating to its object, a feeling of disgust equally excessive. The marquise unwillingly admitted her tradespeople to familiar conversation. The count, one day when his architect let fall his umbrella, picked it up and returned it to him. The marquise had lived with her eyes bandaged, her ears closed ; the count had kept eyes and ears open and had seen and heard a good deal. She was stupid, and without the protection of common sense. He was witty and sensible,

and possessed enlarged views of life and politics. She dreamed of the return of the absurd traditions of a former age, and the restoration of effete monarchies, imagining that the years could be turned back like the hands of a clock. He hoped for things within the power of events to bring forth. For example, he was sincerely persuaded the nobles of France would yet recover slowly and silently, but surely, all their lost power, with its prestige and influence.

But, in the end, they belonged to the same order. They were both aristocrats. The count was a flattered portrait of his class ; the marquise its caricature.

It should be added that M. de Commarin knew how to divest himself of his crushing urbanity in the company of his equals. There he recovered his true character—haughty, self-sufficient, and intractable, enduring contradiction pretty much as a wild horse the application of the spur.

In his own house he was a despot.

Perceiving his father, Albert advanced, and embraced him with an air equally noble and ceremonious, and, in less than a minute, had expressed in well-chosen phrases all the news that had transpired during his absence, and the compliments of the journey.

Then only M. de Commarin perceived the so visible alteration in his son's face.

" You are not well, viscount ? " asked he.

" Oh, yes, monsieur ! " answered Albert dryly.

The count gave an " Ah ! " accompanied by a certain movement of the head—a habitual trick with him, expressing perfect incredulity ; then, turning to his servant, he gave him some orders briefly.

" Now," resumed he, " let us go quickly to the house. I am in haste to feel at home ; and I am hungry, having had nothing to-day but some detestable broth at a wayside station."

M. de Commarin arrived in Paris in very ill humour : his journey into Austria had not brought the result he hoped for.

To crown his dissatisfaction, he had rested, on his homeward way, at the house of an old friend, with whom he had so violent a discussion that they parted without shaking hands.

The count was hardly seated in his carriage, which started at a gallop, before he entered upon the subject of this disagreement.

" I have quarrelled with the Duke de Sairmeuse," said he.

" That seems to me to happen whenever you meet," answered Albert, without intending any raillery.

" True," said the count ; " but this is serious. I passed four days at his country-seat, in a state of inconceivable exasperation. He has been guilty of an act which lowers him in my estimation beyond recovery ! Sairmeuse has sold his estate of Gondresy—one of the finest in the north of France. He cut down the timber, and put up to auction the old château—a princely dwelling, now to be converted into a sugar refinery ; all this for the purpose, as he says, of raising money to meet some legal obligations—debts or settlements, or something of that kind ! "

" And was that the cause of your rupture ? " inquired Albert, without much surprise.

" Certainly it was ! Do you not think it a sufficient one ? "

" But, monsieur, you know the duke has a large family, and is far from rich."

" What does that matter ? A noble of France who sells his land commits an unworthy act. He is guilty of treason against his order ! "

" Oh, monsieur ! " said Albert deprecatingly.

" I said treason ! " continued the count. " I maintain the position. Remember well, viscount, the power has been, and always will be, on the side of wealth—the strongest right with those who hold the soil. The men of '93 well understood this principle, and acted upon it. By impoverishing the nobility, they destroyed their prestige more effectually than by abolishing their titles. A prince dismounted, and without retinue—that is, without means to retain them—is a ridiculous figure ! The Minister of July, who said to the people, ' Make yourselves rich,' was not a fool. He gave them the magic formula for power. But they have not the sense to understand it. They want to go too fast. They launch into speculations, and become rich, it is true ; but in what ? Stocks, bonds, paper—rags, in short. It is smoke they are locking in their coffers. They prefer to invest in merchandise, which pays eight or ten per cent., to investing in vines or corn which will return but three. The peasant is not so foolish. From the moment he owns a piece of ground the size of a handkerchief, he wants to make it as large as a tablecloth. He is slow as the oxen he ploughs with, but as

patient, as tenacious, and as obstinate. He goes directly to his object, pressing firmly against the yoke ; and nothing can stop or turn him aside. He knows that stocks may rise or fall, fortunes be won or lost on 'Change ; but the land always remains—the real standard of wealth. To become a landholder, the peasant starves himself, wears sabots in winter ; and the imbeciles who laugh at him will be astonished by and by when *he* makes his '93, and the peasant becomes a baron in power if not in name."

"I do not understand how this applies," said the viscount.

"You do not understand ? Why, what the peasant is doing is what the nobles ought to have done ! Ruined, their duty was to reconstruct their fortunes. Commerce is interdicted to us ; be it so : agriculture remains. Instead of grumbling uselessly during the half-century, instead of running themselves into debt, in the ridiculous attempt to support an appearance of grandeur, they ought to have retreated to their provinces, shut themselves up in their châteaux ; worked there, economised, denied themselves, as the peasant is doing, purchased the land piece by piece. Had they taken this course, they would to-day possess France. Their wealth would be enormous ; for the value of land rises year after year. I have, without effort, doubled my fortune in thirty years. Blauville, which cost my father a hundred crowns in 1817, is worth to-day more than a million : so that, when I hear the nobles complain, I shrug my shoulders. Who but they themselves are to blame ? They impoverish themselves from year to year. They sell their land to the peasants. Soon they will be reduced to beggary, and their escutcheons. What consoles me is, that the peasant, having become the proprietor of our domains, will then be all-powerful, and will yoke to his chariot-wheels these traders in scrip and stocks, whom he hates as much as I execrate them myself."

The carriage at this moment stopped in the court of the Hôtel de Commarin, after having described that perfect circle, the glory of coachmen who preserve the old traditions.

The count alighted from the carriage, leaning upon his son's arm, and ascended the steps of the grand entrance.

In the immense vestibule, nearly all the servants, dressed in rich liveries, stood in a line.

The count gave them a glance, in passing, as an officer might his soldiers on parade, and proceeded to his

apartments upon the second floor, above the reception rooms.

Never was there a better regulated household than that of the Hôtel de Commarin—a considerable establishment, too ; for the count's fortune enabled him to sustain a retinue greater than that of a German prince. He possessed in a high degree the art, more rare than is generally supposed, of commanding an army of servants.

According to Riviral, a man's manner of giving an order to a lackey establishes his rank better than a hundred genealogies on parchment.

The number of his domestics gave the count neither inconvenience nor embarrassment. They were necessary to him. Although he was exacting, never permitting the expression, " I did not understand," he was rarely heard to administer a reproof.

So perfect was the organisation of this household that its functions were performed like those of a machine—without noise, variation, or effort.

Thus, when the count returned from his journey, the sleeping hôtel was awakened as if by the spell of an enchanter. Each servant was at his post ; and the occupations, interrupted during the past six weeks, resumed without confusion. As the count was known to have passed the day on the road, the dinner was served in advance of the usual hour. All the establishment, even to the lowest scullion, represented the spirit of the first article of the rules of the house, " Servants are not to execute orders, but anticipate them."

M. de Commarin had hardly removed the traces of his journey, and changed his dress, when his maître d'hôtel announced :

" M. le Count is served."

He descended at once ; and father and son met upon the threshold of the dining-room.

This was a large apartment, very high in the ceiling, as were all the rooms of the first floor, and was at once magnificent and simple in its furniture and appointments.

One only of its four sideboards would have encumbered an ordinary dining-room.

A collector of curiosities would have found much to occupy his attention on those four sideboards, loaded as they were with antique gold and silver plate, rare enamels, marvellous china, and porcelain that might make a king of Saxony turn green with jealousy.

The table service, resplendent in silver and cut glass, which occupied the middle of the room, was in keeping with this luxury.

The count was not only a great eater, but was vain of his enormous appetite—the possession of which by a poorer man would have been disastrous. He was fond of recalling the names of great men noted for their capacity of stomach. Charles V devoured mountains of viands. Louis XIV swallowed at each repast as much as six ordinary men. He argued, pleasantly, that we may judge of men's qualities by their digestive capacities. He compared them to lamps, whose power of giving light is in proportion to the oil they consume.

The first half-hour of dinner passed in silence. M. de Commarin ate conscientiously, either not perceiving or not caring to notice that his son ate nothing, but merely sat at the table as if to countenance him. But with the dessert the old nobleman's ill-humour and volubility returned, apparently increased by the burgundy, which he drank unsparingly.

He was partial, moreover, to after-dinner argument, professing a theory that spirited discussion is a perfect digestive. A letter which had been delivered to him on his arrival, and which he had found time to glance over, gave him at once a subject and a point of departure.

" I arrived here at one o'clock," he said ; " and I have already received a homily from Broisfresnay."

" He writes often," observed Albert.

" Too much ; he consumes himself in ink. More ridiculous projects, vain hopes, veritable childishness ! And he mentions at least a dozen names of men high in power as associates. On my word of honour, men seem to have lost their senses ! They talk of lifting the world, only they want the lever and the point on which to rest it. It makes me die with laughter ! "

For ten minutes the count continued to discharge a volley of epigrams and sarcasms against his best friends, without seeming to see that a great many of the foibles he ridiculed were his own as much as theirs.

" If," he continued more seriously—" if they showed any confidence in themselves, they might be entitled to respect ; but they have not even the virtue of courage. They count upon others to do for them what they ought to

do for themselves. They are in continual quest of someone better mounted, who will consent to take them on his crupper. In short, their proceedings are a series of confessions of helplessness, of premature declarations of failure."

Coffee was served ; and the count made a sign.

The servants left the room.

" No," said the count, " I see but one hope for the French aristocracy, but one plank of salvation, one good little law, establishing the right of primogeniture."

" You will never obtain it, monsieur."

" You would oppose such a measure, viscount."

Albert knew by experience what dangerous ground his father was approaching, and was silent.

" Let us put it, then, that I dream of the impossible ! " resumed the count. " Let the nobles do their duty. When the younger sons and daughters of great houses devote themselves to establish their families, by giving up the entire patrimony to its first-born for five generations, contenting themselves each one with a hundred louis a year, then only can great fortunes be reconstructed, and families, instead of being divided by a variety of interests, become united by a common aspiration—have a political influence, a position in the State."

" Unfortunately," objected the viscount, " the time is not favourable to such devotedness."

" I know it, monsieur," replied the count quickly ; " and in my own house I have proved it. I have asked you to renounce the espousal of the granddaughter of this old fool, the Marquise d'Arlanges. To what purpose ? "

" My father——" Albert was beginning.

" It is well," interrupted the count. " You will take your own course ; but remember my prediction : you will give the mortal blow to our house ; you will be one of the largest proprietors in France, but have half a dozen children ; and they will be hardly rich. Live to be an old man, and you will see your grandchildren in poverty ! "

" You put all at the worst, father."

" Without doubt : it is the only means of pointing out the danger, and averting the evil. You talk of your life's happiness. A truly noble man thinks of his name and family before all, even his life's happiness. Mademoiselle d'Arlanges is very pretty, and very attractive ; but she has not a sou. It is your duty to marry an heiress."

" Whom I shall not love ? "

" The same old song. Pshaw ! the lady I wish you to marry will bring you four millions in her apron—a larger dowry than the kings of to-day can give their daughters."

The discussion upon this subject would have been interminable, had Albert taken an active share in it ; but his mind was leagues away : and he answered from time to time only, and then in monosyllables. This absence of opposition was more irritating to the count than the most obstinate contradiction. He directed his utmost efforts to pique his son.

Meanwhile he was vainly prodigal of words and unsparing in provoking and unpleasant allusions. At length, from being irritated, he became furious ; and, on receiving a laconic response, he burst forth :

" *Parbleu !* the son of my maître d'hôtel argues no worse than you. What blood have you in your veins ? You are more like a son of the people than a scion of the de Commarins ! "

There are certain conditions of mind in which the least conversation jars upon the nerves. During the last half-hour Albert had suffered an intolerable punishment. The patience with which he had armed himself at last escaped him.

" Well, monsieur," he answered, " if I resemble a son of the people, there are perhaps good reasons for it."

The glance accompanying the speech was so expressive that the count experienced a sudden shock. All the animation departed from his manner, and, in a hesitating voice, he demanded :

" What do you say, viscount ? "

Albert no sooner uttered the sentence than he regretted his precipitation ; but he had gone too far to retreat.

" Monsieur," he said, with a peculiar calmness. " I have to confer with you on important matters. My honour, yours, the honour of our house, are involved. I intended postponing the conversation till to-morrow, not desiring to trouble you on the evening of your return ; but you have introduced the topic, and we must proceed."

The count listened with ill-concealed anxiety. He divined the misfortune that had occurred, and was terrified at himself for having divined it.

" Believe me, monsieur," continued Albert, " whatever may have been your acts, my voice will never be raised to reproach you. Your constant goodness——"

M. de Commarin held up his hand.

" Speak plainly with me," he said sternly.

Albert was slow to answer : he hesitated where to commence.

" Monsieur," he said at length, " during your absence, I have read all your correspondence with Madame Gerdy—*all !* " emphasising the last word, already so significant.

The count started up, as if stung by a serpent, with such violence that his chair rolled back several paces.

" Not a word ! " he cried, in a terrible voice. " I forbid you to speak."

He was ashamed of his violence, evidently ; for he replaced his chair with an affectation of calmness.

" Who will hereafter refuse to believe in presentiments ? " he resumed in a tone which he strove to render light and rallying. " An hour ago, on seeing your pale face at the railway station, I felt that you had learned something—much or little—of this history. I was sure of it."

With one accord, father and son avoided letting their eyes meet, lest they might encounter glances too eloquent to bear at so painful a moment.

" You said, monsieur," said the count, " honour demands this conference ; it is important, then, to avoid delay. Will you follow me to my room ? "

He rang the bell. A valet appeared.

" Neither M. the viscount nor I am at home to anyone, no matter whom. We are not to be interrupted."

CHAPTER IX

This revelation irritated, much more than surprised, the Count de Commarin.

Indeed, for twenty years he had been expecting to see the truth brought to light. He knew that there could be no secret so carefully guarded that it might not by some chance escape ; and his had been known to four people, three of whom were still living.

He had not forgotten that he had been imprudent enough to trust this secret to paper, knowing all the while that it ought never to have been written.

How could he, a prudent diplomat, a statesman, used to precaution, have put it in writing ? How, after writing,

could he have allowed this fatal correspondence to remain in existence? Why had he not destroyed, at whatever cost, these overwhelming proofs, which sooner or later would be brought against him? Such imprudence could only have been caused by an absurd passion, blind, insensible, improvident even to madness.

It is characteristic of love to have such belief in its continuance that it is scarcely satisfied with the prospect of eternity. Absorbed completely in the present, it takes no thought for the future.

Besides, what man ever dreams of putting himself on his guard against the woman he loves? The enamoured Samson is ever ready to submit his hair to the scissors of his Delilah.

So long as he was Valerie's lover, the count never thought of asking the return of his letters from his beloved accomplice. If the idea had occurred to him, he would have repelled it as an insult to the character of his angel.

What reason could he have had to suspect her discretion? None. He would have been much more likely to have supposed her interested in removing every trace, even the slightest of the occurrences which had taken place. Was it not her son who had received the benefits of the deed—who had usurped another's name and fortune?

When, eight years after, thinking himself deceived, the count had broken off the connection which had given him so much happiness, he thought of obtaining possession of this unhappy correspondence. But he knew no way. A thousand reasons precluded his moving in the matter.

The most urgent of these was that he had resolved never again to meet this woman, once so dearly loved. He did not feel sufficiently sure either of his anger or of his firmness. Could he, without yielding, resist the tearful pleading of those eyes, which had so long held complete sway over his soul?

To look again upon this mistress of his youth would, he feared, result in his forgiving her; and he had been too cruelly wounded in his pride and in his affection to admit the idea of a reconciliation.

On the other hand, to obtain the letters through a third party was entirely out of the question. He abstained, then, from all action, postponing it indefinitely.

"I will go to her," he said; "but not until I have so torn

her from my heart that she will have become indifferent to me. I will not gratify her with the sight of my grief."

So months and years passed on ; and finally he began to say and believe that it was too late.

The truth was, that there were memories which it would have been imprudent to awake. By an unjust mistrust, he might provoke her to using the letters.

Can you better force a well-armed person to use his arms than by demanding their surrender ? After so long a silence, to ask for the letters would be nearly the same as declaring war. Besides, were they still in existence ? Who could tell ? What more likely than that Madame Gerdy had destroyed them, understanding that their existence was dangerous, and that their destruction alone could render her son's usurpation safe ?

M. de Commarin was not blind ; but, finding himself in an inextricable difficulty, he thought the wisest course was to trust to chance ; and so he left this door open in his old age to a guest who was always entering—Unhappiness.

And for more than twenty years now he had never passed a day without cursing his inexcusable folly.

Never had he been able to forget that above his head hung a danger more terrible than the sword of Damocles, suspended by a thread, which the slightest accident might break.

To-day this thread had broken.

Often, when considering the possibility of such a catastrophe, he had asked himself how he should avert it ?

He had formed and rejected many plans ; he had deluded himself, like all men of imagination, who, with a wealth of chimerical projects, find themselves at last surprised while unprepared.

Albert stood respectfully, while his father sat in his great armorial chair, just beneath the large chart, where the genealogical tree of the illustrious family of Rheteau de Commarin spread its luxuriant branches.

The old gentleman permitted no one to see the cruel fears which oppressed him. He seemed neither irritated nor dejected ; but his eyes expressed a haughtiness more than usually disdainful—a self-reliance full of contempt, rendering him imperturbable.

" Now, viscount," he began in a firm voice, " explain yourself. I need say nothing to you of the pain of a father obliged to blush before his son ; you feel, and pity. Let us

spare each other, and try to be calm. Tell me, how did you obtain your knowledge of this correspondence ? "

Albert had had time to recover himself, and prepare for the present struggle, as he had waited four days for this interview with mortal impatience.

The difficulty he experienced in speaking the first words had given place to a dignified and proud demeanour. He expressed himself clearly and forcibly, without losing himself in those details which in grave matters only retard progress.

" Monsieur," he replied, " on Monday morning a young man appeared here, stating that he had business with me of the utmost importance and secrecy. I received him. He then revealed to me that I, alas ! am only your natural son, substituted, through your affection, for the legitimate child born to you by Madame de Commarin."

" And you did not kick this man out of doors ? " exclaimed the count.

" No, monsieur. I should have answered him very sharply, of course ; but, presenting me with a package of letters, he begged me to read them before replying."

" Ah ! " cried M. de Commarin, " you did not throw them in the fire—there was a fire, I suppose ? You held them in your hands ; and they still exist. I would have done very differently ! "

" Monsieur ! " said Albert reproachfully.

And, recalling the position Noel had occupied before the mantel, and the manner in which he stood, he added :

" Even if the thought had occurred to me, it was impracticable. Besides, at the first glance, I recognised your handwriting. I then took the letters, and read them."

" And then ? "

" And then, monsieur, I returned the correspondence to the young man, and asked for a delay of a week ; not to think over it myself—there was no need of that—but because I judged an interview with you indispensable. Now, therefore, I beseech you, tell me whether this substitution ever took place."

" Certainly it did," replied the count violently—" certainly. You know that it did ; for you have read what I wrote to Madame Gerdy, your mother."

Albert had foreseen, had expected this reply ; but it crushed him.

This was one of those misfortunes, so great, that you have

to keep repeating it to yourself before you can actually realise it. This flinching lasted but an instant, however.

" Pardon me, monsieur," he replied. " I believed it ; but I had not a formal assurance of it. All the letters that I read spoke distinctly of your purpose, detailing your plan minutely ; but not one pointed to, or in any way confirmed, the execution of the project."

The count gazed at his son with a look of intense surprise. He recollected distinctly all the letters ; and he could remember that, in writing to Valerie, he had over and over rejoiced at their success, thanking her for having acted in accordance with his wishes.

" You did not finish, then, viscount," he said ; " you did not read all ? "

" Every line, monsieur, and with an attention that you may well understand. The last letter shown me simply announced to Madame Gerdy the arrival of Claudine Lerouge, the nurse who was charged with accomplishing the exchange. I know nothing beyond that."

" A man proofs amount to nothing," muttered the count. at the last m form a plan, cherish it for a long time, and He reproached himself for having answered so hastily. Albert had had only serious suspicions : he had changed them to certainty. What a mistake !

" There can be no possible doubt," he said to himself ; " Valerie has destroyed the most conclusive letters, those which appeared to her the most dangerous, those I wrote after the exchange. But why has she preserved these others, compromising enough in themselves ? And why, after having preserved them, has she let them out of her possession ? "

" Perhaps she is dead ! " said Mme de Commarin aloud.

And at this thought of Valerie dead, without his having again seen her, he started painfully. His heart, after more than twenty years of voluntary separation, still suffered, so deeply rooted was this first love of his youth. He had cursed her ; at this moment he would have pardoned her. She had deceived him, it is true ; but did he not owe to her the only years of happiness he had ever known ? Had she not formed all the poetry of his youth ? Had he experienced since leaving her, one single hour of happiness ? In his present frame of mind, his heart retained only happy memories, like a vase

which, once filled with the precious perfumes, retains the odour even after it is itself destroyed.

" Poor girl ! " he murmured.

He sighed deeply. Three or four times his eyelids fell, as if a tear had nearly fallen. Albert watched him with anxious curiosity. This was the first time since the viscount had grown to man's estate that he had surprised in his father's countenance other emotion than ambition or pride, conquered or triumphant. But M. de Commarin's was not the character to yield long to sentiment.

" You have not told me, viscount," he said, " who sent you this unhappy message ? "

" He came in person, monsieur, not wishing, he told me, to bring a third party into the sad affair. The young man was no other than he whose place I have occupied—your legitimate son, Noel Gerdy himself."

" Yes," said the count in a low tone, " Noel ; that is his name ; I remember." And then, with evident hesitation, he added, " did he speak to you of his—of your mother ? "

" Scarcely, monsieur. He told me that he had been brought up in ignorance of the secret which he had accidentally discovered, and which he revealed to me."

M. de Commarin made no reply. There was nothing more for him to learn. He was reflecting. The decisive moment had come ; and he saw but one way to escape.

" Come, viscount," he said, in a tone so affectionate that Albert was astonished, " do not stand ; sit down here by me, and let us discuss this matter. Let us unite our efforts to shun, if possible, this great misfortune. Confide in me, as a son should in his father. Have you thought of what is to be done ? Have you formed any determination ? "

" It seems to me, monsieur, that hesitation is impossible."

" In what way ? "

" My duty, father, to me is very plain. I ought to give way before your legitimate son without a murmur. Let him come. I am ready to yield to him everything that I have kept from him so long, without a suspicion of the truth—a father's love, his fortune, and his name."

The old gentleman, at this most praiseworthy reply, could scarcely preserve the calmness he had recommended to his son in the earlier part of the interview. His face grew purple ; and he struck the table with his fist more furiously than he had ever done in his life. He, usually so guarded, so

decorous on all occasions, uttered a volley of oaths that would not have done discredit to an old cavalry officer.

"And I tell you, sir, that this, your dream of life, shall never take place. No; that it shan't. I promise you, whatever happens, that things must remain as they are; because it is my wish. You are Viscount de Commarin; and Viscount de Commarin you shall remain, in spite of yourself. You shall retain the title to your death, or at least to mine; for never, while I live, shall your absurd idea be carried out."

"But, monsieur," began Albert timidly.

"You are very fond of interrupting me while I am speaking, monsieur," exclaimed the count. "Do I not know all your objections beforehand? You are going to tell me that it is a revolting injustice, a wicked robbery. I confess it, and grieve over it more than you possibly can. Do you think that I now for the first time repent of my youthful folly? For twenty years, monsieur, I have lamented my true son; for twenty years I have cursed the wickedness of which he is the victim. And yet I taught myself to keep silence, to hide the sorrow and the remorse which has covered my pillow with thorns. In a single instant, your senseless yielding would render my long-suffering of no avail. No, I will never permit it!"

The count read a reply on his son's lips; he stopped him with a withering glance.

"Do you think," he continued, "that I have never wept over the thought of my legitimate son passing his life struggling for a competence? Do you think that I have never felt a burning desire to repair the wrong done him? There have been times, monsieur, when I would have given half of my fortune simply to embrace that child of a wife too tardily appreciated. The fear of casting a shadow of suspicion upon your birth prevented me. I have sacrificed myself to the great name I bear. I received it from my ancestors without a stain. May you hand it down to your children equally spotless! Your first purpose is a worthy one—noble, chivalrous, but you must forget it. Think of the scandal, if our secret should be disclosed to the public gaze. Can you not foresee the joy of that herd of parvenues who surround us? I shudder at the thought of the odium, the ridicule which will attach to our name. Too many families already have stains upon their escutcheons; I hope ours will never be among the number."

M. de Commarin had stopped several minutes, without

Albert's daring to reply, so much had he been accustomed since infancy to respect the least wish of the terrible old gentleman.

" There is no possible way out of it," continued the count. " Shall I to-morrow discard you, and present this Noel as my son, saying, ' Excuse me, but there has been a slight mistake in identity : I didn't know my own son ' ? And then the tribunals will get hold of it. Now, if our name were Benoit, Durand, or Bernard, it would make no difference ; but, when one is called a Commarin, even but for a single day, he must retain it through life. Justice is not the same in every case ; because all have not the same duties. In our position, errors are irreparable. Take courage, then, and show yourself worthy of the name you bear. The storm is upon you ; raise your head to meet it."

Albert's impassibility contributed not a little to increase M. de Commarin's irritation. Firm in an unchangeable resolution, the viscount listened like one fulfilling a duty ; and his face reflected no emotion. The count saw that he was not shaken.

" What have you to reply ? " he asked.

" It seems to me, monsieur, that you do not understand all the dangers to which I am exposed. It is difficult to master the revolts of conscience."

" Indeed ! " interrupted the count contemptuously ; " your conscience revolts, does it ? It has chosen its time badly. Your scruples come too late. So long as you saw, in succeeding me, an illustrious title and a dozen or so of millions, it smiled on you. To-day the name appears to you laden with a heavy fault—a crime, if you will ; and your conscience revolts. Renounce this folly. Children, monsieur, are accountable to their fathers ; and they should obey them. Willing or unwilling, you must be my accomplice ; willing or unwilling, you must bear the burden, as I have borne it. And, however much you suffer, be assured it can never approach what I have endured for so many years."

" Ah, monsieur ! " cried Albert, " is it then I, the dispossessor, who has made this trouble ? Is it not, on the contrary, the dispossessed ? It is not I who have moved in the matter ; it is Noel Gerdy."

" Noel ! " repeated the count.

" Your legitimate son, yes, monsieur. You act as if the issue of this unhappy affair depended solely upon my will.

Do you, then, imagine that Noel Gerdy will be so easily disposed of, so easily silenced? And, if he should raise his voice, do you hope to accomplish much through the considerations you have just mentioned?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"Then you are wrong, monsieur, permit me to tell you. Suppose for a moment that this young man has ever had a soul sufficiently noble to relinquish his claim upon your rank and your fortune. Is there not now the accumulated rancour of years to urge him to oppose us? He cannot help feeling a fierce resentment for the horrible injustice of which he has been the victim. He must passionately long for vengeance, or rather reparation."

"He has no proofs."

"He has your letters, monsieur."

"They are not decisive, you have told me."

"That is true, monsieur; and yet they convinced me, who am interested in not being convinced. Besides, if he needs witnesses, he will find them."

"Who? You, probably."

"Yourself, monsieur. The day when he wishes it, you will betray us. Suppose you were summoned before the tribunals, and that there, under oath, you should be required to speak the truth, what answer would you make?"

M. de Commarin's face darkened at this very natural supposition. He hesitated—he whose honour was usually so great.

"I would save the name of my ancestors," he said at last.

Albert shook his head doubtfully.

"At the price of a lie," he said. "—I never will believe that. But let us suppose even that. He will then call upon Madame Gerdy."

"Oh, I will answer for her!" cried the count; "her interests are the same as ours. If necessary, I will see her. Yes," he added, with an effort, "I will go to her house; I will speak to her; and I will guarantee that she does not betray us."

"And Claudine," continued the young man, "will she be silent, too?"

"For money, yes; and I will give her whatever she asks."

"And you would trust, father, to a paid silence, as if one could ever be sure of a purchased conscience? What is sold to you may be sold to another. A certain sum may close her mouth; a much larger will open it."

" I will risk it."

" You forget, father, that Claudine Lerouge was Noel Gerdy's nurse, that she takes an interest in his happiness, that she loves him. How do you know that he has not already secured her aid ? She lives at Bougival. I have been there, I remember, with you. Without doubt, he sees her often. Perhaps it was she who put him on the track of this correspondence. He spoke to me of her, as though he was sure of her testimony. He almost proposed my going to her for information."

" Alas ! " cried the count, " why is not Claudine dead instead of my faithful Germain ? "

" You see, monsieur," concluded Albert, " Claudine Lerouge alone stands in the way of your project."

" Ah, no ! " cried the count ; " I will find some expedient."

The obstinate old gentleman was not willing to give in to this argument, whose very clearness blinded him. The pride of his blood paralysed in him his usual practical good sense, and obscured his remarkable clear-headedness. To acknowledge himself conquered by necessity humiliated him, seemed to him disgraceful, unworthy of him. He did not remember to have met during his long career an invincible resistance or an absolute impediment.

He was a little like those Hercules, who, having never experienced a limit to their strength, believe that they could overcome mountains if they desired.

He had also the misfortune of all men of imagination, who fall in love with their projects, and who try to make them succeed on all occasions, as if wishing hard was all that was necessary to change their dreams into realities.

Albert this time broke the silence.

" I see, monsieur," he said, " that you fear, above all things, the publicity of this sad history ; the possible scandal renders you desperate. But, unless we yield, the uproar will be terrible. If a writ were issued against us to-morrow, in four days our trial will be the talk of all Europe. The newspapers will print the facts, accompanied by heaven knows what comments of their own. Our name, however the trial results, will appear in all the papers of the world. This might be borne, if we were sure of succeeding ; but we might fail, father—we might fail. Then think of the noise, think of the dishonour branded upon us in public opinion."

" I think," said the count, " that you can have neither respect nor affection for me, when you speak in that way."

" It is my duty, monsieur, to point out to you the evils I see threatening, and which there is yet time to avoid. Noel Gerdy is your legitimate son ; recognise him, acknowledge his just claims, receive him. We can make the change very quickly. It is easy to account for it through a mistake of the nurse—Claudine Lerouge, for instance. All the parties being in accord, there can be no trouble made. What is to prevent the new Viscount de Commarin from quitting Paris, and being lost to sight ? He might travel in Europe four or five years ; by the end of that time all would be forgotten. No one will remember me more. "

M. de Commarin was not listening ; he was deep in thought.

" But instead of contesting, viscount," he cried, " we might compromise. We may be able to purchase these letters. What does this young fellow want ? A position and a fortune ? I will give him both. I will make him as rich as he can ask. I will give him a million ; if need be, two, three—half of all I possess. With money, you see, much money——"

" Spare him, monsieur ; he is your son."

" Curse it ! and I wish him to the devil for it ! I will show him that he had better compromise. I will prove to him the bad policy of the earthen pot beating against the iron kettle ; and, if he is not a fool, he will understand it."

The count rubbed his hands while speaking. He was delighted with this brilliant plan of negotiation. It could not fail to result favourably. A crowd of arguments occurred to his mind for proving his case. He would buy back again his lost quiet.

But Albert did not seem to share his father's hopes.

" You will perhaps think it unkind in me, monsieur," he said sadly, " to dispel this last illusion of yours ; but it must be. Do not delude yourself with the idea of an amicable arrangement : the awakening will only be the more painful. I have seen this Gerdy, my father ; and he is not one, I assure you, to be intimidated. If ever there was an energetic will in the world, his is one. He is truly your son ; and his expression, like yours, shows an iron resolution, to be broken but never bent. I can still hear his voice trembling with resentment, while he spoke to me. I can still see the dark fire of his eyes. No ; he will never compromise. He will have

all or nothing ; and I cannot say that he is wrong. If we resist, he will attack us without the slightest consideration. He is secure, he will cling to us with stubborn animosity. He will drag us from court to court ; he will not stop short of utter defeat or complete triumph."

Accustomed to absolute, almost unresisting obedience from his son, the old gentleman was astounded at this unexpected obstinacy.

" What is your purpose, then ? " he asked.

" It is this, monsieur. I should utterly despise myself, if I did not spare your old age this greatest of calamities. Your name does not belong to me ; I will take my own. I am your natural son. I will yield to your legitimate child. Permit me to withdraw with at least the honour of having freely done my duty. Do not force me to await arrest by the tribunal, which would drive me out in disgrace."

" What ! " cried the count, stunned, " you will abandon me ? You refuse to sustain me, you turn against me, recognise the rights of this man, in spite of my wishes ? "

Albert bowed. He was much moved, but still remained firm.

" My resolution is irrevocably taken," he replied. " I can never consent to despoil your son."

" Cruel, ungrateful boy ! " cried M. de Commarin.

His wrath was such that, when he found he could do nothing by abuse, he passed at once to jeering.

" But, no," he continued, " you are great, you are noble, you are generous ; you are acting after the most approved pattern of chivalry, viscount—I should say, my very dear M. Gerdy—after the fashion in Plutarch's time ! So you renounce my name, my fortune, and you leave me. You will shake the dust from your shoes upon my threshold ; and you will go out into the world. I see only one difficulty in your way. How do you expect to live, my stoic philosopher ? Have you an estate at your fingers' ends, like Jean Jacques' Emile ? Or, my worthy M. Gerdy, have you learned econony from the four thousand francs a month I allow you for waxing your moustache ? Perhaps you will gamble at the Bourse ! Then you will uphold my name with a vengeance—my name, that seems to you so very burdensome to wear. Is dirt, then, so great an attraction for you that you must jump from the carriage so eagerly ? Say, rather, that the company of my friends embarrasses you,

and that you are anxious to go where you will be among your own equals."

"I am very wretched, monsieur," replied Albert to this avalanche of insults, "and you would crush me!"

"You wretched! Well, whose fault is it? But let us get back to my question: how and on what will you live?"

"I am not so romantic as you are pleased to suggest, monsieur. I must confess that, for the future, I have counted upon your goodness. You are so rich that five hundred thousand francs would not materially affect your fortune; and, on the income of that sum, I could live quietly, if not happily."

"And if I should refuse you this money?"

"I know you well enough, monsieur, to feel sure that you will not refuse it. You are too just to wish that I should expiate alone the wrongs that were not of my making. Left to myself, I should have, at my present age, achieved a position. It is too late for me to make one now; but I can at least try."

"Superb!" broke in the count; "this is superb! I never heard of such a hero of romance. What a character. It has all the purity of Rome, all the firmness of Sparta. It is as grand as anything in antiquity. But tell me, what do you expect from all this astonishing disinterestedness?"

"Nothing, monsieur."

The count shrugged his shoulders, looking sarcastically at his son.

"The compensation is very slight. And you expect to make me believe it? No, monsieur, mankind is not in the habit of doing such fine actions for its own satisfaction. You have some reason for acting so grandly, which I fail to catch."

"None but what I have already told you."

"Then you intend to renounce everything; you will even abandon your proposed union with Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlanges? You forget that for two years I have in vain begged you to give this marriage up."

"No, monsieur. I have seen Clair. I have explained my unhappy position to her. Whatever happens, she has sworn to be my wife."

"And do you think that Madame d'Arlanges will give her granddaughter to plain M. Gerdy?"

"I hope so, monsieur. The marquise is sufficiently infected with nobility to prefer the natural child of a gentleman to the son of some honest tradesman; but if she

refuses—ah, well, we will await her death, though without desiring it."

Albert's uniformly calm tone enraged the count.

" Can this be my son ? " he cried. " Never ! What blood have you in your veins, monsieur ? Perhaps your worthy mother might tell us, provided she ever knew herself."

" Monsieur," broke in Albert fiercely, " think well before you speak. She is my mother, and that is sufficient. I am her son, not her judge. No one in my presence shall speak disrespectfully of her : I will not permit it, monsieur ; and I will suffer it least of all from you."

The count used truly heroic efforts to keep his anger within bounds ; but he was beside himself at Albert's position. What, he rebelled, he dared to brave him to his face, he threatened him ! The old man jumped from his chair, and moved toward his son as if he would strike him.

" Leave the room ! " he cried, in a voice choking with rage—" leave the room instantly ! Retire to your apartments, and take care not to leave them without my orders. To-morrow I will give you my decision."

Albert bowed respectfully, but without lowering his eyes, and walked slowly to the door. He had already opened it, when M. de Commarin experienced one of those revulsions of feeling so frequent in violent natures.

" Albert," said he, " come back and listen to me."

The young man turned, much affected by this change of tone.

" Do not go," continued the count. " until I have asked your pardon. You are worthy of being the heir of a great house, monsieur. I may be irritated by you ; but I can never lose my esteem for you. You are a noble man, Albert. Give me your hand."

This was a happy moment for both, and such a one as they had scarcely ever experienced in their lives, restrained as they had been by cold etiquette. The count felt proud of his son, and recognised in him himself at that age. As for Albert, the real meaning of the scene then occurring impressed him : it had until now escaped him. For a long time their hands remained clasped, without either being able to utter a word.

At last, M. de Commarin resumed his seat beneath the genealogical chart.

" I must ask you to leave me, Albert," he said frankly. " I

must be alone, to reflect upon, to try and accustom myself to this terrible blow."

And, as the young man closed the door, he added, as if giving vent to his inmost thoughts :

" If he deserts me, he in whom I have placed all my hope, what will become of me ? O my God ! And what can the other ever be to me ? "

Albert's features, when he left the count's study, showed the violent emotions he had felt during the interview. The servants whom he met noticed it the more, as they had heard something of the quarrel.

" Well," said an old footman, who had been in the family thirty years, " the count has had another unhappy scene with his son. The old fellow has been in a dreadful passion.

" I got wind of it at dinner," spoke up a *valet de chambre*. " The count restrained himself enough not to burst out before me ; but he rolled his eyes fiercely."

" What can be the matter ? "

" Pshaw ! that's more than they know themselves. Why, Denis, before whom they always speak freely, says that they often wrangle for hours together, like dogs, about things which he can never see through."

" Ah," cried out a young fellow, who was being trained to service, " if I were in the viscount's place, I'd settle the old gent pretty effectually ! "

" Joseph, my friend," said the footman pointedly, " you are a fool. You might give your father his walking ticket very properly, because you never expect five sous from him, and you have already learned how to earn your living without doing any work at all. But the viscount, pray tell me what he is good for, what he knows how to do ? Put him in the centre of Paris, with only his fine hands for capital, and you will see."

" Yes, but he has his mother's property in Normandy," replied Joseph.

" I can't for the life of me," said the *valet de chambre*, " see what the count finds to complain of ; for his son is a perfect model, and I shouldn't be sorry to have one like him. There was a very different pair, when I was in the Marquis de Courtivois's service. He was one who made it a point never to be in good humour. His eldest son, who is a friend of the viscount's, and who comes here occasionally, is a pit without a bottom, as far as money is concerned. He will fritter

away a thousand-franc note quicker than Joseph can smoke a pipe."

" But the marquis isn't rich," said a little old man, who himself had perhaps the enormous wages of fifteen francs : " he can't have more than sixty thousand francs' income at the most."

" That's why he gets angry. Every day there is some new story about his son. He had an apartment in the house ; he went in and out when he pleased ; he passed his nights in gaming and drinking ; he cut up so with the actresses that the police had to interfere. Besides all this, I have many a time had to help him up to his room, and put him to bed, when the waiters from the restaurants brought him home in a carriage, so drunk that he could scarcely say a word."

" Ha ! " exclaimed Joseph enthusiastically, " this fellow's service must be mighty profitable."

" That was according to circumstances. When he won at play, he was lavish with his money ; but he always lost : and, when he was drunk, he had a quick temper, and didn't spare the blows. I must say, though, that his cigars were splendid. But he was a ruffian ; the viscount here is a quiet sort of fellow. He is severe ; but he ain't ever brutal. Then he's pretty generous ; which in the long run pays us best. I must say that he is better than most, but the old count is mighty unreasonable."

Such was the judgment of the servants. That of society was perhaps less favourable.

The Viscount de Commarin was not one of those who possess the rather questionable and at times unenviable accomplishment of pleasing everyone. He was wise enough to distrust those astonishing personages who are always praising everybody. In looking about us, we often see men of success and reputation who are simply dolts, without any merit except their perfect insignificance. That stupid propriety which offends no one, that uniform politeness which shocks no one's vanity, have peculiarly the gift of pleasing and of succeeding.

One cannot meet certain persons without saying, " I know that face ; I have seen it somewhere before," because it has no individuality, but simply resembles faces seen in a common crowd. It is precisely so with the minds of certain other people. When they speak, you know exactly what they are going to say ; you have heard the same thing so many

times already from them, you know all their ideas by heart. These people are welcomed everywhere ; because they have nothing peculiar about them ; and peculiarity, especially in the upper classes, is always irritating and offensive : they detest all innovations.

Albert was peculiar ; consequently much discussed, and very differently estimated. He was charged with sins of the most opposite character, with faults so contradictory that they were their own defence. Some accused him, for instance, of entertaining ideas entirely too liberal for one of his rank ; and, at the same time, others complained of his excessive arrogance. He was charged with treating with insulting levity the most serious questions, and was then blamed for his affectation of gravity. People knew him scarcely well enough to love him, while they were jealous of him and feared him.

He wore a bored look in all fashionable reunions, which was considered very bad taste. Forced by his relations, by his father, to go into society a great deal, he was bored, and committed the unpardonable sin of letting it be seen. Perhaps he had been disgusted by the constant court made to him, by the rather coarse attentions which were never spared the noble heir of one of the richest families in France. Having all the necessary qualities for shining, he despised them. Dreadful sin ! he did not abuse his advantages ; and no one ever heard of his getting into a scrape.

He had had once, it was said, a very decided liking for Madame Prosny, perhaps the naughtiest, certainly the most mischievous woman in Paris ; but that was all. Mothers who had daughters to dispose of upheld him ; but for the last two years they had turned against him, when his love for Mademoiselle d'Arlanges became well known.

At the club they rallied him on his prudence. He had had, like others, his run of follies ; but he had soon got disgusted with what it is the fashion to call pleasure. The noble profession of *bon vivant* appeared to him very tame and tiresome. He did not enjoy passing his nights at cards ; nor did he appreciate the society of those frail sisters who in Paris give notoriety to their lovers. He affirmed that a gentleman was not necessarily an object of ridicule because he would not expose himself in the theatre with these women. Finally, none of his friends could ever inspire him with a passion for the turf.

As doing nothing wearied him, he attempted, like the parvenu, to give some meaning to life by work. He purposed, after a while, to take part in public affairs ; and, as he had often been struck with the gross ignorance of many men in power, he wished to avoid their example. He busied himself with politics ; and this was the cause of all his quarrels with his father. The one word of " liberal " was enough to throw the count into convulsions ; and he suspected his son of liberalism ever since reading an article by the viscount, published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*.

His ideas, however, did not prevent his fully sustaining his rank. He spent most nobly on the world the revenue which placed his father and himself a little above it. His establishment, distinct from the count's, was arranged as that of a wealthy young gentleman's ought to be. His liveries left nothing to be desired ; and his horses and equipages were celebrated. Letters of invitation were eagerly sought for to the grand hunting parties which he formed every year, towards the end of October, at Commarin—an admirable piece of property, covered with immense woods.

Albert's love for Claire—a deep, well-considered love—had contributed not a little to keep him from the habits and life of the pleasant and elegant idleness indulged in by his friends. A noble attachment is always a great safeguard. In contending against it, M. de Commarin had only succeeded in increasing its intensity and ensuring its continuance. This passion, so annoying to the count, was the source of the most vivid, the most powerful emotions in the viscount. Ennui was banished from his existence.

All his thoughts took the same direction ; all his actions had but one aim. Could he look to the right or the left, when, at the end of his journey, he perceived the reward so ardently desired ? He resolved that he would never have any wife but Claire ; his father absolutely refused his consent. The effort to change this refusal had long been the business of his life. Finally, after three years of perseverance, he had triumphed ; the count had given his consent. And now, just as he was reaping the happiness of success, Noel had arrived, implacable as fate, with his cursed letters.

On leaving M. de Commarin, and while slowly mounting the stairway which led to his apartment, Albert's thoughts reverted to Claire. What was she doing at this moment ? Thinking of him, without a doubt. She knew that the crisis

would come this very evening, or to-morrow at the latest. She must be praying.

Albert felt broken down. His suffering was intense. He felt dizzy ; his head seemed ready to burst. He rang and ordered some tea.

" Monsieur does wrong in not sending for the doctor," said Lubin, his *valet de chambre*. " I ought to disobey you, and send for him myself."

" It would be useless," replied Albert sadly ; " he could do nothing for my illness."

As the valet was leaving the room, he added :

" Say nothing about my suffering to anyone, Lubin : it is nothing at all. If I am really ill, I will ring."

At this moment, to see anyone, to hear a voice, to have had to reply, seemed insupportable. He longed to be left entirely to himself.

After the painful emotions arising from his explanations with the count, he could not sleep. He opened one of the library windows, and leaned against the casement. It was a beautiful night, and there was a lovely moon. Seen at this hour, by the mild, tremulous evening light, the gardens seemed twice their usual size. The motionless tops of the great trees stretched away like an immense plain, hiding the neighbouring houses. The clumps in the flower garden, set off by the green shrubbery, appeared like great black figures ; while in the carefully sanded walks sparkled particles of shell, little pieces of glass, and the polished pebbles. At the right, in the still lighted servants' quarters, could be heard the servants passing to and fro ; and the step of a groom sounded on the pavement in the court. The horses stamped in the stable ; and the rattling of their halter chains against the bars of the manger could be distinguished. In the carriage-house they were unharnessing the vehicle, always kept ready throughout the evening, in case the count should wish to go out.

Albert had there under his eyes a complete picture of his magnificence. He sighed deeply.

" Must I, then, lose all this ? " he murmured. " I can scarcely, even for myself, abandon so many splendours without regret ; and thinking of Claire makes it harder. Have I not dreamed of a life of exceptional happiness for her, almost impossible to realise without wealth ? "

Midnight sounded from St. Clotilde, whose twin arrows he could perceive by leaning slightly forward.

He shivered ; it was growing cold.

He closed his window, and sat down near the fire, which he stirred up. In the hope of obtaining a respite from his thoughts, he took up the evening paper, in which was an account of the assassination at Jonchère ; but he found it impossible to read. The lines danced before his eyes. Then he thought of writing to Claire. He sat down at his desk and wrote, " My dearly loved Claire." He could go no further ; his distracted brain could not furnish him with a single sentence.

At last, at break of day, weariness overpowered him, sleep surprised him, on a sofa, where he had thrown himself —a heavy sleep peopled with phantoms.

At half-past nine in the morning, he was awakened with a start, by the noise of his door being opened with a crash.

A servant entered, frightened, so breathless, having come up the stairway four steps at a time, that he could scarcely speak.

" Monsieur," he said, " viscount, quick, fly, hide yourself, save yourself : they are here, they——"

A commissary of police in uniform appeared at the library door. He was followed by a number of men, among whom could be seen, keeping as much out of sight as possible, Père Tabaret.

The commissary approached Albert.

" You are," he asked, " Guy Louis Marie Albert de Rheteau de Commarin ? "

" Yes, monsieur."

The commissary raised his hand, while pronouncing the usual formula.

" M. de Commarin, in the name of the law I arrest you."

" Me, monsieur, me ? "

Albert, aroused suddenly from his painful dreams, seemed hardly to comprehend what was taking place. He seemed to ask himself :

" Am I really awake ? Is not this some hideous nightmare ? "

He threw a stupid look, much to the astonishment of the commissary of police, upon the men, and upon Père Tabaret, who acted very much as though he was the one arrested.

" Here is the warrant," added the commissary, unfolding the paper.

Mechanically Albert glanced over it.

" Claudine assassinated ! " he cried.

Then very low, but distinct enough to be heard by the commissary, by one of the officers, and by Père Tabaret, he added :

" I am lost ! "

While the commissary was making the formal inquiries, which immediately follow all arrests, the officers spread through the apartment, and proceeded to a searching examination of them. They had received orders to obey Père Tabaret ; and the old fellow guided them in their researches, made them ransack drawers and closets, and move the furniture. They seized quite a number of articles belonging to the viscount—papers, manuscripts, and a very voluminous correspondence ; but it was with especial delight that Père Tabaret put his hands on certain articles, which were carefully described in order in the official report.

1. In the first room—a waiting-room, hung with all sorts of weapons—behind a sofa, a broken foil. This foil had a peculiar handle, and was unlike those commonly sold. It bore the count's coronet, with the initials A. C. It had been broken at about the middle ; and the end could not be found. When asked, the viscount declared that he could give no account as to what had become of the missing end.

2. In the dressing-room, trousers of black cloth, still wet, bearing stains of mud or dirt. All one side was covered with greenish moss, as if the wearer had climbed over a wall. In front, there were numerous rents ; and near the knee was one ten centimetres long. The aforesaid trousers had not been hung up in the wardrobe, but appeared to have been hidden between two large trunks of clothing.

3. In the pocket of the above-described trousers were found a pair of pearl-grey gloves. The palm of the right-hand glove showed a large greenish stain, produced by grass or moss. The end of the fingers had been worn by rubbing. Upon the back of both gloves scratches were noticed, evidently made by finger-nails.

4. Two pairs of boots, one of which, well cleaned, were still damp ; an umbrella recently wetted, the end of which was still covered with white mud.

5. In a large room, called " the library," a box of cigars of the Trabucos brand, and upon the mantel a number of cigar-holders in amber and meerschaum.

The last article noted down, Père Tabaret approached the commissary of police.

" I have everything I could desire," he whispered.

" And I have finished, too," replied the commissary. " This chap here don't seem to know exactly how to act. Do you see ? He gave in on the first attack. I suppose you will call it lack of experience."

" Before the day is over," replied the amateur detective in a whisper, " he won't be quite so crestfallen. But now, suddenly awakened, you know—— Always arrest them early in the morning ; take them in bed before they are awake."

" I have spoken with two or three of the servants. They tell some singular stories."

" Very well : we shall see. But I must hurry and find the judge of inquiry, who will be impatient."

Albert began to revive a little from the stupor into which he had been plunged on the entrance of the commissary of police.

" Monsieur," he asked, " will you permit me to say a few words in your presence to the Count de Commarin ? I am a victim of some mistake, which will be quickly remedied."

" It's always a mistake," muttered Père Tabaret.

" What you ask is impossible," replied the commissary. " I have special orders of the strictest sort. You cannot henceforth communicate with a living soul. A carriage is in waiting below. Will you descend ? "

In crossing the vestibule, Albert noticed great agitation among the servants. They all seemed to have lost their senses. Denis gave orders in a sharp, imperative tone. Then he thought he heard that the Count de Commarin had been struck with apoplexy. After that, he remembered nothing.

They almost carried him to the carriage, which drove off as fast as the two little horses could go. A faster carriage bore away Père Tabaret.

CHAPTER X

The visitor who wanders in the labyrinth of galleries and stairways in the law courts, and mounts to the third story in the left wing, will find himself in a long, low-studded gallery, badly lighted by narrow windows, and pierced at short intervals by little doors, like a hall at the Ministry or at a lodging-house.

It is a place difficult to view dispassionately ; the imagination makes it appear so dark and dismal.

It needs a Dante to compose an inscription to place above the doors which lead from it. From morning to night, the flagstones resound under the heavy tread of the gendarmes, who accompany the prisoners. You can scarcely recall anything but sad figures there. There are the parents or friends of the accused, the witnesses, the detectives. In this gallery, far from the sight of men, the judicial curriculum is gone through with.

Each one of the little doors, which has its number painted over it in black, opens into the office of a judge of inquiry. All the rooms are just alike : if you see one, you have seen them all. They are nothing terrible nor sad in themselves ; and yet it is difficult to enter one of them without a shudder. They are cold. The walls all seem moist with the tears which have been shed there. You shudder, at thinking of the avowals wrested from criminals, of the confessions, broken with sobs, murmured there.

In the office of the judge of inquiry, Justice clothes herself in none of that apparel which she afterwards dons in order to strike fear into the masses. She is still simple, and almost disposed to kindness. She says to the prisoner :

" I have strong reasons for thinking you guilty ; but prove to me your innocence, and I will release you."

On entering one of these rooms, a stranger would imagine that he had walked into a cheap shop by mistake. The furniture is of the most primitive sort, as is the case in all places where important matters are transacted. Of what consequence are surroundings to the judge hunting down the author of a crime, or to the accused who is defending his life ?

A desk full of documents for the judge, a table for the clerk, an armchair, and one or two chairs besides comprise the entire furniture of the antechamber of the court of assize. The walls are hung with green paper, the curtains are green, and the floors are carpeted in the same colour. M. Daburon's office bore the number fifteen.

At nine o'clock in the morning he had arrived, and was waiting. His course resolved upon, he lost not an instant, understanding as well as Père Tabaret the necessity of rapid action. So he had already had an interview with the imperial solicitor, and had consulted the officers of the police judiciary.

Besides the warrant issued against Albert, he had

despatched summons of immediate appearance before him to the Count de Commarin, Madame Gerdy, Noel, and some of Albert's servants.

He thought it essential to examine all these before calling in the prisoner.

Under his orders, ten detectives were sent into the country ; and he himself sat in his office, like a general of an army, who sends off his aides-de-camp to begin the battle, and who hopes for victory through his cunning plans.

Often, at this same hour, he had sat in this same office, under almost identical conditions. A crime had been committed : he believed he had discovered the criminal ; he had given orders for his arrest. Was not this his duty ? But he had never experienced this anxiety of mind which disturbed him now. Many a time had he issued warrants of arrest without having nearly half the proofs which shone out so clearly in the present case. He kept repeating this to himself ; and yet he could not quiet this dreadful anxiety, which would not give him a moment's rest.

He wondered why his people were so long in making their appearance. He walked up and down the room, counting the minutes, drawing out his watch three times within the quarter of an hour, to compare it with the clock. Hearing a step in the gallery, nearly deserted at that hour, he involuntarily moved near the door, stopped, and listened.

Someone knocked. It was his clerk, late this morning.

There was nothing particular in this man ; he was long rather than large, and very slim. His gait was precise, his gestures methodical ; his face was as impassive as if it had been cut out of a piece of yellow wood.

He was thirty-four years of age, and since thirty had taken minutes of examination for four judges of inquiry in succession. It is said that he could hear without moving a muscle the most utter absurdities.

An ingenious writer has thus defined a clerk. " A pen for the magistrate ; a personage who is dumb but speaks, who is blind but writes, who is deaf but hears." This man answered the definition. His name was Constant.

He bowed to the judge, and excused himself for his lateness. He had been busy with his book-keeping, which he did every morning ; and he had got so interested in it that his wife had had to remind him of the way time was passing.

" You are still in good time," said Daburon ; " but we shall have plenty of work : so you had better get your papers ready."

Five minutes later, the usher introduced Noel Gerdy.

He entered with an easy manner, like an advocate who had considerable practice in the Palais, and who knew its ways. He in no way resembled, this morning, the friend of Père Tabaret ; still less could he have been recognised as the lover of Madame Juliette. He was entirely another being, or, rather, he had resumed his customary rôle.

It was now the official who appeared—one who recognised his confrères, esteemed his friends, was beloved in the circle of his acquaintance.

From his firm step, his placid face, one would never imagine that, after an evening of emotion and excitement, after a stolen visit to his mistress, he had passed the night by the pillows of a dying woman, and that woman his mother, or at least the one who had filled his mother's place.

What a contrast between him and the judge !

The judge had not slept, either ; and you could see lack of rest in his feebleness, in his anxious look, in the dark circles about his eyes. The front of his shirt was all rumpled ; not even his cuffs were fresh. Occupied with the course of events, the soul had forgotten the body. Noel's well-shaved chin, on the contrary, rested upon an irreproachably white cravat ; his collar had not a wrinkle ; his hair and his whiskers were most carefully brushed. He bowed to Daburon, and held out his summons.

" You summoned me, monsieur," he said ; " and I am at your orders."

The judge of inquiry had met the young advocate several times in the lobbies of the Palais ; and he recognised him at sight. He remembered having heard this Gerdy spoken of as a man of talent and promise, whose reputation was fast rising. He therefore welcomed him as a fellow-workman, and invited him to be seated.

The preliminaries common in the examinations of all witnesses ended ; the name, surname, age, place of business, and so on registered, the judge, who had followed his clerk with his eyes while he was writing, turned to Noel.

" Do you know, M. Gerdy," he began, " the business on account of which you are troubled with appearing before me ? "

" Yes, monsieur, the assassination of the poor old woman at Jonchère."

" Precisely," replied Daburon.

Then, calling to mind his promise to Père Tabaret, he added :

" If Justice has summoned you so promptly, it is because we have found your name often mentioned in the papers of the Widow Lerouge."

" I am not surprised at that," replied the advocate. " We have been much interested in this good woman, who was my nurse ; and I know that Madame Gerdy wrote to her quite often."

" Very well ; you can then give me some information about her."

" It will be, I fear, monsieur, very incomplete. I know very little about this poor Mother Lerouge. I was taken from her at a very early age ; and since I have been a man I have thought little about her, except to send her occasionally a little aid."

" You have never visited her ? "

" Oh, yes ! I have gone there many times ; but I remained only a few moments each time. Madame Gerdy, who has often seen her, and to whom she entrusted all her affairs, could enlighten you much better than I, however."

" I expect," said the judge, " to see Madame Gerdy here ; she must have received a summons."

" She has, monsieur ; but it will be impossible for her to appear ; she is ill."

" Seriously ? "

" So seriously that you will be obliged, I think, to give up all expectations from her testimony. She is attacked with a disease which, in the words of my friend, Dr. Hervé, never pardons. It is something like inflammation of the brain—encephalitis, if I am not mistaken. It may be that her life will be saved ; but she will never recover her reason. If she does not die, she will be insane."

Daburon appeared much troubled.

" This is very vexatious," he muttered. " And you think, my dear sir, that it will be impossible to obtain anything from her ? "

" It is useless even to hope for it. She has completely lost her reason. She was, when I left her, in such a state of utter prostration that I fear she cannot live through the day."

" And when was she attacked by this illness ? "

" Yesterday evening."

" Suddenly ? "

" Yes, monsieur, apparently, at least ; though I myself think she has been suffering from it for the last three weeks at least. But yesterday, on rising from dinner, after having eaten but little, she took up a newspaper ; and, by a most unhappy chance, her eyes fell exactly upon the lines which told of this crime. All at once she uttered a loud cry, fell back in her chair, and thence slipped to the floor, murmuring, ' Oh, the unhappy man, the unhappy man ! ' "

" The unhappy woman, you mean."

" No, monsieur. I spoke advisedly. Evidently the exclamation did not refer to my poor nurse."

Upon this reply, so important and yet made in the most unconscious tone, Daburon raised his eyes to the witness. The advocate lowered his head.

" And then ? " asked the judge, after a moment's silence, during which he had taken a few notes.

" Those words, monsieur, were the last spoken by Madame Gerdy. Assisted by our servant, I carried her to her bed. The doctor was called ; and since then she has not recovered consciousness. The doctor——"

" It is well," interrupted Daburon. " Let us leave that for the present. Do you know, monsieur, anyone who might have been at enmity with the Widow Lerouge ? "

" No."

" She had no enemies ? Well, now tell me, does there exist to your knowledge anyone having any interest whatever in the death of this poor woman ? "

The judge of inquiry, in putting this question, kept his eyes fixed on Noel's, not allowing him to turn or lower his head.

The advocate started, and seemed deeply moved. He was disconcerted ; he hesitated, as if a struggle was going on within him.

Finally, in a voice which was by no means firm, he replied :

" No, no one."

" Is that really true ? " demanded the judge, looking at him more sternly. " You know no one whom this crime benefits, or whom it might benefit—absolutely no one ? "

" I know only one thing, monsieur," replied Noel ; " and

that is that, as far as I am concerned, it has caused me an irreparable injury."

"At last," thought Daburon, "we have got at the letters; and I have not betrayed poor Père Tabaret. It would be too bad to cause the least trouble to that zealous and invaluable man."

"An injury to you, my dear sir?" he replied. "You will, I hope, explain yourself."

The embarrassment of which Noel had already given some signs, appeared now much more marked.

"I am aware, monsieur," he replied, "that I owe justice not merely the truth, but the whole truth; but there are circumstances involved so delicate that the conscience of a man of honour sees danger to itself. Then it is very hard to be obliged to unveil these sad secrets, whose revelations may some time——"

Daburon interrupted with a gesture. Noel's sad tone impressed him. Knowing, beforehand, what he was about to hear, he was pained for the young advocate. He turned to his clerk.

"Constant!" said he in a peculiar tone.

This tone was evidently a signal; for the long clerk arose methodically, put his pen behind his ear, and went out in his measured tread.

Noel appeared sensible of this delicacy. His face expressed the strongest gratitude; his look returned thanks.

"I am greatly obliged to you, monsieur," he said, with suppressed warmth, "for your generous kindness. What I have to say is very painful; but now before you it will be scarcely an effort to speak."

"Fear nothing," replied the judge; "I will only retain in your statement what seems to me absolutely indispensable."

"I feel scarcely master of myself, monsieur," began Noel; "so pray pardon my emotion. If any words escape me that seem charged with bitterness, excuse them; it will be involuntarily. Up to the past few days, I always believed that I was the offspring of illicit love. My history is short. I have been honourably ambitious. I have worked hard. He who has no name must make one, you know. I have passed a quiet life, retired and austere, as people must, who, starting at the foot of the ladder, wish to reach the top. I worshipped her whom I believed to be my mother; and I felt convinced that she loved me in return. The stain of my birth had some

humiliations attached to it ; but I despised them. Comparing my lot with that of so many others, I felt that I had more than common advantages. One day, Providence placed in my hands all the letters which my father, the Count de Commarin, had written to Madame Gerdy at the time of their liaison. On reading these letters, I was convinced that I was not what I had hitherto believed myself to be—that Madame Gerdy was not my mother ! "

And, without giving Daburon time to reply, he laid before him the facts which, twelve hours before, he had recounted to Père Tabaret.

It was the same story, with the same circumstances, the same abundance of precise and conclusive details ; but the tone was entirely changed. Before the old detective, the young advocate had been emphatic and violent ; but now, in the office of the judge of inquiry, he had restrained and sobered his violent emotions.

One might imagine that he adapted his manner to his auditor, wishing to produce the same effect on both, and using that method which would best accomplish his purpose.

To Père Tabaret, an ordinary mind, he used the exaggeration of anger ; to Daburon, of superior intelligence, he used the exaggeration of restraint.

While his mind rebelled against his unjust lot, he nevertheless seemed to bow, armed with resignation, before a blind fatality.

With genuine eloquence and rare happiness of expression, he drew his situation on the day following the discovery—his grief, his perplexity, his doubts.

To support this moral certainty, there needed some positive testimony. Could he hope for this from the count or from Madame Gerdy, both interested in concealing the truth ? No. But he had counted upon that of his nurse—the poor old woman who loved him, and who, near the close of her life, would be glad to free her conscience from this heavy load. She was dead now ; and the letters became mere waste papers in his hands.

Then he passed to his explanation with Madame Gerdy ; and he gave the judge even fuller details than he had given his old neighbour.

She had, he said, at first utterly denied the substitution ; but he gave it to be understood that, plied with questions, overcome by the evidence, in a moment of despair she had

confessed all, declaring at the same time that she would retract and deny this confession, being resolved at all hazards that her son should preserve his position.

From this scene, in the advocate's judgment, the first attacks of the sickness, to which she had finally succumbed, might be dated.

Noel then described his interview with the Viscount de Commarin.

In his narrative there slipped in a few inaccuracies, but so slight that it would be difficult to charge him with them. Besides, there was nothing in them at all unfavourable to Albert.

He insisted, on the contrary, upon the excellent impression which he had received of that young man.

Albert had received the revelation with a certain defiance, it is true, but with a noble firmness at the same time, and, like a brave heart, was ready to bow before the justification of right.

In fact, he drew an almost enthusiastic portrait of this rival, who had not been spoiled by prosperity, who had left him without a look of hatred, towards whom he felt himself drawn, and who, after all, was his brother.

Daburon had listened to Noel with the most unremitting attention, without a word, a movement, a frown betraying his feelings. When he had ended :

" How, monsieur," observed the judge, " could you have told me that, in your opinion, no one was interested in the death of the Widow Lerouge ? "

The advocate made no reply.

" It seems to me that the Viscount de Commarin's position has by it become almost indefensible. Madame Gerdy is insane ; the count will deny all ; your letters prove nothing. It is evident that the crime is of the greatest service to this young man, and that it was committed at a singularly favourable moment."

" Oh, monsieur ! " cried Noel, protesting with all his energy, " this insinuation is dreadful."

The judge watched the advocate's face narrowly. Was he speaking frankly, or was he but playing the generous rôle ? Could it really be that he had never had any suspicion of this ? Noel did not flinch under the gaze, but almost immediately continued :

" What reason could Albert have for trembling, fearing for his position ? I did not utter one word of threat, even

indirectly. I did not present myself raging, like a robbed man, who demands that everything which had been taken from him should be restored on the spot. I merely presented the facts to Albert, saying, 'Here, what do you think we ought to do? Be the judge.'"

"And he asked you for time?"

"Yes. I had just suggested his accompanying me to the Widow Lerouge, whose testimony might dispel all doubts; he did not seem to understand me. But he was well acquainted with her, having often visited her with the count, who supplied her, I have since learned, liberally with money."

"Does not this generosity appear to you very singular?"

"No."

"Can you explain why the viscount did not appear disposed to accompany you?"

"Certainly. He said that he wished, before all, to have an explanation with his father, who was then absent, but who would return within a few days."

The truth, as all the world knows, and delights in proclaiming, has an accent which no one can mistake. Daburon had not the slightest doubt of his witness's good faith. Noel continued with an ingenuous candour, like an honest heart which suspicion has never touched with its bat's wing.

"The idea of treating at once with my father pleased me exceedingly. I consider it so much better to wash all one's dirty linen at home that I have never desired anything but an amicable arrangement. With my hands full of proofs, I should still recoil from a public trial."

"Would you not have brought an action?"

"Never, monsieur, at any price. Could I," he added, proudly, "on assuming my rightful name, begin by dishonouring it?"

For once, Daburon could not conceal his sincere admiration.

"A most praiseworthy feeling, monsieur," he said.

"I think," replied Noel, "it is but natural. If the worse came to the worst, I had determined to leave my title with Albert. Certainly the name of Commarin is an illustrious one; but I hope that, within ten years, mine will be equally so. I would have simply demanded a large pecuniary compensation. I possess nothing; and I have often been hampered in my career by this miserable question of money. That which Madame Gerdy owed to the generosity of my

father was almost entirely spent. My education had absorbed a great part of it ; and it was long before my profession covered my expenses. Madame Gerdy and I lived very quietly ; but, unfortunately, though simple in her tastes, she lacked economy and system ; and no one can imagine how great our expenses have been. But I have nothing to reproach myself with, whatever happens. From the commencement, I have kept my anger well under control ; and even now I bear no ill-will. On learning of the death of my nurse, though, I cast all my hopes into the sea."

" You are wrong, my dear sir," said the judge. " I advise you to still hope. Perhaps, before the end is reached, you will yet enter into possession of your rights. Justice, I will not conceal from you, thinks she has found the assassin of the Widow Lerouge. At this moment, the Viscount Albert is doubtless under arrest."

" What ! " exclaimed Noel, with a sort of stupor ; " can it be true ? I was, then, not mistaken, monsieur, in the meaning of your words. I dreaded to understand them."

" You have not mistaken me, monsieur," said Daburon. " I thank you for your sincere, straightforward explanations ; they have eased my task materially. To-morrow—for to-day my time is all taken up—we will regularly take your deposition, at this same hour, if convenient to you. There is nothing more, I believe, except to ask you for the letters in your possession, and which are indispensable to me."

" Within an hour, monsieur, you shall have them," replied Noel.

And he retired, after having warmly expressed his gratitude to the judge of inquiry.

Less preoccupied, the advocate perceived at the end of the gallery Père Tabaret, who had just arrived, eager and happy, like a bearer of good news, as he was.

His carriage had scarcely stopped before the gate of the Palais de Justice before he was in the court, and rushing towards the porch. To see him jumping more nimbly than a fifth-rate lawyer's clerk up the steep flight of stairs leading to the judge's office, you would never believe that he had been years on the wrong side of fifty. Even he doubted the fact. He did not remember having passed the dark line : he had never felt so fresh, so agile, in such spirits ; he had springs of steel in his limbs.

He crossed the gallery in two jumps, and burst like a

cannon-shot into the judge's apartment, hustling against the methodical clerk in the rudest of ways, without even asking his pardon.

" Caught ! " he cried, while yet on the threshold, " caught, nipped, squeezed, strung, trapped, locked ! We have got our man."

Père Tabaret, more " Tirauclair " than ever, gesticulated with such comical vehemence and such remarkable contortions that even the long clerk smiled ; for which, however, he took himself severely to task, on going to bed that night.

But Daburon, still under the influence of Noel's deposition, was shocked at this apparently unseasonable joy ; although he felt the safer for it. He looked severely at Père Tabaret, saying :

" Hush, monsieur ; be decent ; compose yourself."

At any other time the old fellow would have been frightened at having deserved such a reprimand. Now it made no impression on him.

" I can't be quiet," he replied ; " and I am proud of it. Never has anything like it been seen. All that I predicted has been found. Broken foil, pearl-grey gloves slightly frayed, cigar-holder ; nothing is wanting. You shall have them, monsieur, and many more like them. I have a little system of my own, which appears by no means a bad one. Just see the triumph of my method of induction, which Gevrol ridiculed so. I'd give a hundred francs if he were only here now. But no ; my Gevrol wants to nab the man with the earrings ; he is capable of doing just that. He is a fine fellow, this Gevrol, a famous fellow ! How much do you give him a year for his skill?"

" Come, my dear Tabaret," said the judge, as soon as he could get a word in, " be serious, if you can, and let us proceed regularly."

" Pshaw ! " replied the old fellow, " what good will it do ? It is a clear case now. When they bring our man before you, show him simply the particles taken from the fingers of the victim side by side with his torn gloves ; and you will overwhelm him. I wager that he will confess all, *hic et nunc*— yes, I wager my head against his : although that's pretty risky, for he will get off yet ! These milksops on the jury are just capable of according him extenuating circumstances. I'd give him extenuating circumstances. Ah, these snails destroy justice ! Why, if all the world were of my mind, the punishment of these rascals wouldn't take such a time ! The

moment they were captured, that moment they should be strung up. That's my opinion."

Daburon resigned himself to this shower of words. When the old fellow's excitement had cooled down a little, he simply began questioning him. He was even then in great trouble to obtain the exact details of the arrest—details which might confirm the official report of the commissary of police.

The judge appeared much surprised at hearing that Albert, at sight of the warrant, had exclaimed, " I am lost ! "

" That," muttered he, " is a terrible proof against him."

" Certainly," replied Père Tabaret. " In his ordinary state, he would never have allowed these words to escape him, which in fact destroy him. It was because we arrested him when he was scarcely awake. He hadn't been in bed, but was lying in a troubled sleep upon a sofa when we arrived. I took good care to send a frightened servant in in advance, and then to follow closely upon him myself; because he was thus demoralised. All my calculations were made. But, never fear, he will find a plausible excuse for this fatal exclamation. By the way, I should add that we found on the floor, near by, last evening's *Gazette de France*, all rumpled, which contained the report of the assassination. This is the first time that a piece of news in the papers ever helped to nab a criminal."

" Yes," murmured the judge, deep in thought—" yes, you are a valuable man, Tabaret." Then, louder, he added, " I am thoroughly convinced ; for Noel Gerdy has just this moment left me."

" You have seen Noel," cried the old fellow.

On the instant all his proud self-satisfaction disappeared. A cloud of anxiety, like a veil, spread over his face, and eclipsed his joy.

" Noel here," he repeated ; then timidly added, " and does he know ? "

" Nothing," replied Daburon. " I had no need of bringing you in. Besides, had I not promised absolute secrecy ? "

" Ah, that's all right," cried Père Tabaret. " And what do you think of Noel ? "

" His is, I am sure, a noble, worthy heart," said the magistrate—" a nature both strong and tender. The sentiments which I heard him express here, and the genuineness of which it is impossible to doubt, manifested an elevation of soul, unhappily, very rare. Seldom in my life have I met with a man who so won my sympathy from the first. I can well

understand one's pride in being among his friends."

"Just what I said ; he has precisely the same effect upon everyone. I love him as though he were my own child ; and, whatever happens, he is to inherit my entire fortune ; yes, I intend leaving him everything. My will is made, and in the hands of Baron, my notary. There is a legacy, too, for Madame Gerdy ; but I am going to scratch that out at once."

"Madame Gerdy, Tabaret, will soon be beyond all need of worldly goods."

"How, what do you mean ? Has the count——"

"She is dying, and will hardly last through the day ; M. Gerdy told me so himself."

"Ah ! heavens ! " cried the old fellow, "what do you tell me ? Dying ? Noel will go distracted ; but no ; since she is not his mother, how can it affect him ? Dying ? I was so fond of her before this discovery. Poor soul ! It seems as though all the accomplices in that great sin are passing away at the same time ; for I forgot to tell you that, just as I was leaving the Hôtel de Commarin, I heard a servant telling another that the count, at the news of his son's arrest, had fallen in a fit of apoplexy."

"That will be the worst of misfortunes for young Gerdy."

"For Noel ? "

"I had counted upon M. de Commarin's testimony to recover for him all that he so well deserves. The count dead, the Widow Lerouge dead, Madame Gerdy dying, or in any event insane, who then can tell us whether the plan detailed in these letters was ever carried into execution ? "

"True," murmured Père Tabaret ; "it is true ! And I did not see it. What fatality ! For I am not deceived ; I am certain that——"

He did not finish. Daburon's office door opened ; and the Count de Commarin himself appeared in the flesh, as stately as one of those old portraits which you might imagine frozen in their gilded frames.

The old gentleman signed with his hand ; and the two servants who had helped him up as far as the gallery, sustaining him on either side, retired.

CHAPTER XI

It was the Count de Commarin, or, rather, his shadow. His head, usually carried so high, fell upon his breast ; his

figure was bent ; his eyes had no longer their accustomed fire ; his fair hands trembled. The extreme disorder of his dress rendered more striking still the change which had come over him. In one night he had grown twenty years older.

These robust old men resemble great trees whose inner wood has crumbled away, and whose only life is in the bark without.

They are apparently unshaken, they seem to set time at defiance ; yet one blast of wind casts them to the earth. This man, yesterday so proud of never having bent to a storm, was now completely prostrated. The pride of his name had constituted his entire strength ; that humbled, he seemed utterly overwhelmed. In him everything gave way at once ; all his supports failed him at the same time. His cold, lifeless gaze revealed the dull stupor of his thoughts. He presented such an image of utter despair that the judge of inquiry shuddered at the sight. Tabaret looked frightened, and even the clerk seemed moved.

"Constant," said M. Daburon quickly, "go with M. Tabaret, and see if there's any news at the préfecture."

The clerk left the room, followed by the old man, who went away regretfully. The count had not noticed their presence ; he paid no attention to their departure.

Daburon offered him a seat, which he accepted with a sad smile. " I feel so weak," said he, " you must excuse my sitting."

Apologies to an inferior magistrate ! What an advance in civilisation, when the nobility consider themselves subject to the law, and bow to its decrees ! It was far different when the Duchess of Bouillon mocked at Parliament, when the haughty nobles that infested the reign of Louis XIV treated with the greatest indignity the counsellor of the *chambre d'ardente*. All the world respects justice nowadays ; and an innocent man need fear but little, even when defended only by a simple, conscientious magistrate.

" You are perhaps too unwell, count," said the judge, " to give me the explanations I had hoped for."

" I am better, thank you," replied M. de Commarin, " than I have been since the terrible blow has fallen upon me. When I heard of the crime of which my son is accused, and of his arrest, I was stunned. I believed myself strong ; I find myself a poor, weak old man. My servants

thought me dead. Would that I were. The strength of my constitution, my physician tells me, was all that saved me ; but I know that heaven has kept me alive, that I may drink to the bitter dregs this cup of humiliation."

He stopped for a moment, choked by a flow of blood that rose to his mouth.

The judge of inquiry remained near the table, not daring to move.

After a few moments' rest, the count found relief, and proceeded :

" Unhappy man that I am ! did I not expect it ? Everything comes to light sooner or later. I am punished for my great sin—pride. I thought myself out of reach of the thunderbolt ; and I have been the means of drawing down the storm upon my house. Albert an assassin ! A Viscount de Commarin arraigned before a court of assize ! Ah, monsieur, punish me, too ; for I alone, and long ago, laid the foundation of this crime. A race bearing for fifteen centuries a spotless name closes with me in infamy."

Daburon considered the conduct of the Count de Commarin unpardonable, and had determined not to spare him.

He had expected to meet a proud, haughty noble, almost unmanageable ; and he had resolved to humble his arrogance.

Perhaps the treatment he had received of old from the Marquise d'Arlanges had given him, unconsciously, a slight grudge against aristocracy.

He had vaguely thought of certain rather severe remarks, which were to overcome the old gentleman, and bring him to his senses.

But, when he found in his presence a real penitent, his indignation changed to profound pity ; and he asked himself how he could assuage his grief.

" Write, monsieur," continued the count, with an exultation of which he would not have been capable ten minutes before—" write my avowal withholding nothing. I have no longer need of mercy nor of tenderness. What have I to fear now ? Is not my disgrace public ? Must not I, Count Rheteau de Commarin, appear before the tribunal, to proclaim the infamy of our house ? Ah ! all is lost now, even honour itself. Write, monsieur ; my wish is, that all the world shall know that I am the most to blame. But they shall also know that already the punishment has been terrible,

and that there is no new need of this last and mortal trial."

The count interrupted himself, to concentrate and arrange his memory.

He continued, then, with a firmer voice, adapting his tone to what he had to say :

" When I was of Albert's age, monsieur, my parents made me marry, in spite of my protestations, the noblest and purest of young girls. I made her the most unhappy of women. I could not love her. I cherished a most passionate love for a mistress, who had trusted herself to me, and whom I had loved for many years. I found her rich in beauty, purity, and soul. Her name was Valerie. My heart is dead and cold in me, monsieur ; but, ah ! when I pronounce that name, it calls me again to life. In spite of my marriage, I could not induce myself to part from her ; nor did she wish it. The idea of a disgraceful separation was revolting to her ; for she loved me then. Our relations continued.

" My wife and my mistress became mothers at nearly the same time. This coincidence suggested to me the sad idea of sacrificing my legitimate son to his less fortunate brother. I communicated this project to Valerie. To my surprise she refused it with horror. Already the maternal instinct had awakened in her ; she would not be separated from her child. I have preserved, as a memento of my folly, the letters which she wrote to me at this time. I have re-read them only this night. Ah ! how could I have refused both her arguments and her prayers ? It was because I was mad. She had the same presentiment of evil which weighs me down to-day. But I came to Paris. I had absolute control over her, I threatened to leave her, never to see her again. She yielded ; and my valet and Claudine Lerouge were charged with this wicked substitution. It is, therefore, the son of my mistress who wears the title of Viscount de Commarin, and who was arrested but an hour since."

Daburon had not hoped for a declaration so clear, and, above all, so prompt. He secretly rejoiced for the young advocate, whose sentiments had so won upon him.

" So, count," said he, " you acknowledge that Noel Gerdy was the issue of your legitimate marriage, and that he alone is entitled to bear your name ? "

" Yes, monsieur. Alas ! I was then more delighted at the success of my project than I should have been over the most brilliant victory. I was so intoxicated with the joy of having

my Valerie's child there, near me, that I forgot everything. I had transferred to him a part of my love for his mother ; or, rather, I loved him still better, if that be possible. The thought that he would bear my name, that he would inherit all my wealth, to the detriment of the other, transported me with delight. The other I hated ; I could not even look upon him. I do not recollect having embraced him twice even.

" It was on this point alone that Valerie, who was very good, reproached me severely.

" One thing alone interfered with my happiness. The Countess de Commarin adored him whom she believed to be her son, and always wished to have him on her knees. I cannot express what I suffered at seeing my wife cover with kisses and caresses the child of my mistress.

" But I kept him from her as much as I could ; and she, poor girl ! not understanding what was passing within me, imagined that I was doing everything to keep her son from loving her, She died, monsieur, with this idea, which poisoned her last days. She died of sorrow ; but saintlike, without a complaint, without a murmur, pardon upon her lips and in her heart."

Much pressed for time, Daburon, however, did not dare to interrupt the count, and ask him briefly for the immediate facts of the case. He knew that fever alone gave him this energy, to which a moment after might succeed the most complete prostration. He feared, if he stopped him for an instant, that he would not have strength enough to begin again.

" I had not," continued the count, " a tear for her. What had she been in my life ? A cause of sorrow and remorse. But the justice of God, in advance of man's, took a terrible revenge. One day I was warned that Valerie had deceived me, and had broken with me for a long time. I could not believe it at first ; it seemed to me impossible, absurd. I would have sooner doubted myself than her. I had taken her from a garret, where she had worked sixteen hours to earn thirty sous : she owed everything to me. Everything had gone so smoothly in the past that her falseness was in some way repugnant to my reason. I could not induce myself to feel jealous. However, I inquired into the matter ; I watched her ; I even descended to setting a spy upon her. I had been told the truth. This unhappy girl had a lover, and had had him for more than ten years. He was a cavalry officer. He came to her house with every

precaution. Usually he departed about midnight: but sometimes he came to pass the night, and in that case left in the early morning. Being stationed near Paris, he obtained leaves to visit it; and during these leaves, he remained shut up in her house without going out at all. One evening my spies brought me word that he was there. I hastened to the house. My presence did not embarrass her. She received me as usual, throwing her arms about my neck. I thought that my spies had deceived me; and I was going to tell her all, when I saw upon the piano a buckskin glove, such as is worn by soldiers. Not wishing a scene, and not knowing to what excess my anger might carry me, I took my departure without a word. I have never seen her since. She wrote to me. I did not open her letters. She attempted to force her way into my presence, but in vain: my servants had orders that they dared not break."

Could this be the Count de Commarin, celebrated for his haughty coldness, for his reserve, so full of disdain, who spoke thus, who opened his whole life without restrictions, without reserve? And to whom? To a stranger.

He was in one of those desperate states, allied to madness, when all reflection leaves us, when we must have some outlet to a too powerful emotion.

What mattered this secret to him, so courageously carried for so many years?

He disburdened himself of it, like the miserable man who, weighed down by a too heavy burden, casts it to the earth without caring where it falls, nor how it tempts the cupidity of the passers-by.

"Nothing," he continued—"no, nothing, can approach to what I then endured. My very heart-strings were bound up in that woman. She was like a part of myself. In separating myself from her, it seemed to me that I was tearing away a part of my own flesh. I cannot tell what furious passions her memory stirred within me. I scorned her and longed for her with equal vehemence. I hated her, and I loved her. And to this day I have retained her detestable image. Nothing can make me forget her. I have never consoled myself for her loss. And that is not all; terrible doubts about Albert occurred to me. Was I really his father? Can you understand what my punishment was, when I said to myself, 'I have perhaps sacrificed my own child to that of an utter stranger.' This thought made me hate the youth.

To my great love, there succeeded an unconquerable repulsion. How often, in those times, I struggled against an insane desire to murder him ! Since then, I have learned to subdue my aversion ; but I have never completely mastered it. Albert, monsieur, has been the best of sons. Nevertheless, there has always been an icy barrier between us which he could never explain. Often I have been upon the point of presenting myself before the tribunals, of avowing all, of reclaiming my legitimate heir ; but regard for my rank has prevented me, I recoiled before the scandal. I feared the ridicule or disgrace that would attach itself to my name ; and yet I have not been able to save it from infamy."

The voice of the old gentleman was silent after these words. With a desolate movement, he buried his face in both hands. Two great tears, almost immediately dry, rolled silently down his wrinkled cheeks.

In the meantime, the door of the study opened half-way, and the head of the long clerk appeared.

Daburon signed to him to enter, and then, addressing M. de Commarin, said, in a voice that compassion made the more gentle :

" Monsieur, in the eyes of heaven, as in the eyes of society, you have committed a great sin ; and the results, you see, are the most disastrous. This sin it is your duty to repair as much as lies in your power."

" Such is my intention, monsieur, and, shall I say, my dearest wish."

" You doubtless understand me," continued Daburon.

" Yes, monsieur," replied the old man—" yes, I understand you."

" It will doubtless be a consolation for you," added the judge, " to learn that Noel Gerdy is worthy in all respects of the high position that you are going to restore to him. You will certainly acknowledge that his character is of the greater worth, from his having raised himself by his own exertions. He is a man of great talent, better and worthier than anyone I know. You will have a son worthy of his ancestors. And no one of your family will regret, monsieur, that the Viscount Albert is not a Commarin."

" No," replied the count quickly, " a Commarin would have died by this time ; and blood washes all away."

This remark of the old gentleman set the judge of inquiry to think profoundly.

" Are you then sure," said he, " of the viscount's guilt ? "

M. de Commarin gave the judge a look of surprise.

" I only arrived in Paris yesterday evening," he replied ; " and I am entirely ignorant of all that has occurred. I only know that they would not proceed on trifles against a man of Albert's rank. If you have arrested him, it is quite evident that you have something more than suspicion against him—that you possess positive proofs."

Daburon bit his lips, and, for a moment, could not conceal a feeling of displeasure. He had neglected his usual prudence, had moved too quickly. He had believed the count's mind entirely overthrown ; and now he had aroused his defiance. All the skill in the world could not repair such an unfortunate mistake.

As the result of an examination, from which much had been expected, all his plans might be overturned.

A witness on his guard is a witness no longer to be depended upon ; he trembles for fear of compromising himself, measures the weight of the questions, and hesitates as to his answers.

On the other hand, justice, in the form of a magistrate, is disposed to doubt everything, to imagine everything, and to suspect all the world.

How far was the count a stranger to the crime at Jonchère ? Evidently, several days before it, although doubting Albert's paternity, he had made great efforts to retain his son in his place. His story showed that he thought his honour concerned in his retention.

Was he not a man to suppress, by every means, an inconvenient witness ? Thus reasoned M. Daburon.

And yet he could not clearly see how the Count de Commarin's interests and his restless uncertainty were concerned in the matter. His whole life opposed it.

" Monsieur," he began again more sternly, " when were you informed of the discovery of your secret ? "

" Last evening, by Albert himself. He spoke to me of this sad story, and of a deed which I now seek in vain to explain, unless——"

The count stopped short, as if his reason had been struck by the improbability of the supposition which he had formed.

" Unless—— ? " inquired the magistrate quickly.

" Monsieur," said the count, without replying directly, " Albert will be a hero, if he be not the criminal."

" Ah ! " said the magistrate quickly, " have you, then, reason to think him innocent ? "

Daburon's spite was so plainly visible in the tone of his words that M. de Commarin could and ought to have seen the appearance of a wicked intention. He started, evidently offended, and righted himself by saying :

" I am no more a witness now to discharge than I was a moment ago to condemn. I desire only to make justice clear, in accordance with my duty."

" Confound it," said Daburon to himself, " here I have offended him again ! Is this the way to do things, making mistake after mistake ? "

" The facts are these," said the count. " Yesterday, after having spoken to me of these cursed letters, Albert began to set a trap to discover the truth—for he still had doubts, Noel Gerdy not having obtained the complete correspondence. An animated discussion arose between us. He declared his resolution to give way to Noel. I, on the other hand, was resolved to compromise, cost what it might. Albert dared to oppose me. All my efforts to convert him to my views were in vain. Vainly I tried to touch those feelings in his breast which I had supposed the most sensitive. He firmly repeated his intention to retire in spite of me, declaring himself satisfied if I would consent to allow him a modest competence. I again attempted to shake him, by showing him that his marriage, so ardently looked forward to for two years, would be broken off by this blow. He replied that he felt sure of the constancy of his fiancée, Mademoiselle d'Arlanges."

This name fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the judge of inquiry. He fell back in his chair.

Feeling that he was turning crimson, he took, at a venture, from his table a large bundle of papers, and, to hide his emotion, raised it to his face, as if he was trying to decipher an illegible word.

He began to understand the difficult duty with which he was charged. He seemed troubled like a child, having neither his usual calmness nor foresight. He felt that he might commit the most serious blunder. Why had he undertaken this inquiry ? Could he keep himself a free arbiter ? Did he think his will would be impartial ?

Gladly would he have turned over to another the further examination of the count ; but could he ? His conscience

told him that this would be another blunder. He renewed, then, the painful examination.

" Monsieur," said he, " the sentiments expressed by the viscount are very fine, without doubt ; but did he not speak to you of the Widow Lerouge ? "

" Yes," replied the count, who appeared suddenly to brighten, as by the remembrance of some unnoticed circumstances—" yes, certainly."

" He might have shown you that the testimony of this woman would render a struggle with M. Gerdy impossible."

" Precisely, monsieur ; and, aside from the question of duty, it was upon that that he based his refusal to follow my wishes."

" It will be necessary, count, for you to repeat to me very exactly all that passed between the viscount and yourself. Please strive to repeat his words as nearly as possible."

M. de Commarin obeyed without much difficulty. For a moment, a salutary reaction had worked upon him. His blood, excited by the persistence of the examination, renewed its accustomed course. His brain redeemed itself.

The scene of last evening was admirably presented to his memory, even to the most minute details. The sound of Albert's words were again in his ears ; he saw again his expressive gestures.

As his story advanced, brilliant with clearness and precision, Daburon's conviction was confirmed.

The judge turned against Albert precisely what had the day before won the count's admiration.

" What wonderful acting ! " thought he. " Tabaret is decidedly possessed of second sight. To his inconceivable boldness, this young man joins an infernal cleverness. The genius of crime itself inspires him. It is a miracle that we have been able to unmask him. How well everything was foreseen and arranged ! How marvellously this scene with his father was brought about, in order to bring doubt in case of discovery ! There is not a sentence which lacks a purpose, which does not tend to ward off suspicion. What refinement of execution ! What over-anxious care for details ! Nothing failed him, not even the great devotion of his fiancée. Had he really informed Claire ? Probably I might be sure of this ; but I should have to return to her, to speak to her again. Poor child ! to love such a man ! But he will now appear before her in his true colours.

This discussion, too, with the count was his plank of safety. It committed him to nothing, and gained time. He would, of course, raise objections, since they would only end by binding himself the more firmly in his father's heart. He could thus make a merit of his compliance, and would ask a reward for his helplessness. And, when Noel should return to the charge, he would find against him the count, who would boldly deny everything, politely refuse him ; and he would, of course, be driven out as an impostor and forger."

It was a strange coincidence, but yet easily explained, that M. de Commarin, while telling his story, arrived precisely at the same ideas with the judge, at conclusions almost identical.

In fact, why this persistence on the subject of Claudine ? He remembered plainly that, in his anger he had said to his son : "Mankind is not in the habit of doing such fine actions for its own satisfaction." This great disinterestedness now explained itself.

" I thank you, monsieur," said Daburon : " I will say nothing positive ; but Justice has weighty reasons to believe that, in the scene which you have just reported to me, the Viscount Albert played a part previously arranged."

" And well arranged," murmured the count ; " for he deceived me—me ! "

He was interrupted by the entrance of Noel, who carried a shagreen portfolio, ornamented with black figures, under his arm.

The advocate bowed to the old gentleman, who in his turn arose and retired politely to the end of the room.

" Monsieur," said Noel, in an undertone to the judge, " you will find all the letters in this portfolio. I must ask permission to leave you at once, as Madame Gerdy's condition grows hourly more alarming."

Noel had raised his voice a little in pronouncing these last words ; and the count heard them. He started, and needed great effort to restrain the question which leaped from his heart into his mouth.

" You must give me a moment, my dear fellow," said the judge.

Daburon then quitted his chair, and, taking the advocate by the hand, led him to the count.

" M. de Commarin," said he, " I have the honour of presenting to you M. Noel Gerdy."

M. de Commarin was probably expecting some scene of this kind ; for not a muscle of his face moved : he remained perfectly calm. Noel, on his side, was like a man who had received a blow on the head ; he staggered, and was obliged to seek support from the back of a chair.

Then these two, father and son, stood face to face, apparently deep in thought, in reality examining one another with dark distrust, each striving to gather something of the other's thought.

Daburon had hoped much from this *coup de théâtre*, which he had planned since the count's arrival. He had expected to bring about, by this abrupt presentation, an intensely pathetic scene, which would not give his clients time for reflection. The count would open his arms ; Noel would throw himself into them ; and this reconciliation would only await the sanction of the tribunals to be complete.

The coldness of one, the embarrassment of the other, disconcerted his plans. He believed a more pressing intervention necessary.

" Count," said he reproachfully, " remember that M. Gerdy is your legitimate son."

M. de Commarin made no reply ; to judge from his lack of emotion, he had not heard.

Then Noel, summoning all his courage, ventured to speak first :

" Monsieur," he stammered, " I only wish——"

" You may call me your father," interrupted the old man, in a tone which certainly had nothing of emotion or tenderness in it. Then, addressing the judge :

" Can I be of any further use ? " he asked.

" Only to hear your statement read," replied Daburon, " and to sign it, if you find it taken down correctly. You may proceed, Constant," he added.

The long clerk made a half-turn in his chair, and commenced. He had a peculiar way of sputtering over what he had scrawled. He read very quickly, all at one dash, without paying attention to periods, commas, questions, or replies, as long as his breath lasted. When he could go on no longer, he took a breath, and went on as before. Unconsciously, he reminded you of those divers who now and then raise their heads above water, obtain a supply of air, and disappear again. Noel was the only one to listen attentively to the reading, which was to unpractised ears unintelligible. It apprised

him of things which it was important for him to know. At last Constant pronounced the formula, *en foi de quoi*, etc., which ends all official reports in France.

He handed the pen to the count, who signed without hesitation. The old gentleman then turned towards Noel.

"I am not very strong," he said; "you must, therefore, my son" (this word was emphasised) "help your father to his carriage."

The young advocate advanced eagerly. His face brightened, while he passed the count's arm through his own.

When they were gone, Daburon could not resist an impulse of curiosity. He hastened to the door, which he opened; and, keeping his body in the background, that he might not himself be seen, he extended his head, examining the gallery with a glance.

The count and Noel had not yet reached the end. They were going slowly. The count seemed to drag heavily and painfully along; the advocate took short steps, bending lightly on the side towards the count; and all his movements were marked with the greatest solicitude. The judge retained his position until they were lost to view by a turn in the gallery. Then he went back to his place, heaving a deep sigh.

"At least," said he, "I have helped to make one person happy. The day will not be utterly wasted."

But he had no time to give way to such thoughts, the hours flew by so quickly. He had to examine Albert as soon as possible; and he had still to receive the statements of many of the servants of the Count de Commarin's house, and to receive the report of the commissary of police charged with the arrest.

The above-named domestics, who had waited their turn a long while, were without delay brought in, one after the other.

They had but little information to give; but there were as many new charges as there were witnesses. It was easy to see that all believed their master guilty.

Albert's conduct since the beginning of this fatal week, his least words, his most insignificant movements, were reported, commented upon, and explained.

The man who lives in the midst of thirty servants is like an insect in a glass box under the magnifying glass of a naturalist. No one of his acts escapes attention; he can scarcely have a secret; and, if they cannot divine what it is, they at least know he has one. From morning until night,

he is the point of observation for thirty pairs of eyes, interested in studying the slightest change in his face.

The judge had, therefore, an abundance of frivolous details ; which at the time they occurred meant nothing, but the most trifling of which seemed all at once to the viscount to become a matter of life and death.

By combining these depositions, reconciling them, and putting them in order, Daburon could follow his prisoner hour by hour to his going out on Sunday morning.

On that Sunday morning, the viscount had given orders that all visitors should be informed that he had gone into the country. From that moment, the whole household perceived that something had gone wrong, and annoyed him.

He did not leave his study on that day, but had had his dinner brought to him. He ate very little—only some soup, and a bit of fish, with white wines. While eating, he had said to M. Contois, the butler, " Remind the cook to spice this sauce a little more in future," and then added in a low tone, " Ah, to what purpose ? " In the evening he dismissed the servants from all duties, saying, " Go, and amuse yourselves." He expressly warned them not to enter his room until he rang.

On Monday, he did not rise until noon, although usually an early riser. He complained of a violent headache, and of weakness. He took, however, a cup of tea. He ordered out his coupé, but almost immediately countermanded the order. His *valet de chambre*, Lubin, heard him say," It is too late to hesitate " ; and, a few moments after, " I must finish it." Shortly afterwards, he began writing.

Lubin had been instructed to carry a letter to Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlanges, with orders to deliver it to herself or to Mademoiselle Schmidt, the governess, only. A second letter, with two cheques of a thousand francs, was entrusted to Joseph, to be carried to the club. Joseph no longer remembered the person to whom it was addressed; but it was not a titled name.

That evening Albert took only a little soup, and remained shut up in his room. He was up early on Tuesday. He walked up and down the house, like a soul in pain, or like one who awaited with impatience something which had not arrived. Upon his going into the garden, the gardener asked his advice concerning a lawn. He replied, " You may consult the count upon his return."

He breakfasted precisely as on the day before. About one o'clock, he went down to the stables, and, with an air of sadness, he caressed his favourite mare, Norma. Stroking her neck, he said, " Poor creature ! poor old girl ! "

At three o'clock, a messenger arrived with a letter. The viscount took it, and opened it hastily. He was then opposite the flower garden. Two footmen heard him distinctly say, "She cannot resist." He entered the house, and burned the letter in the large fireplace in the entry.

As he was sitting down to dinner, at six o'clock, two of his friends, M. de Courtivois and the Marquis of Chouze, insisted upon seeing him, in spite of all orders. They would not be refused. These gentlemen were anxious to carry him away to a party of pleasure ; but he refused, saying that he had a very important appointment.

At dinner, he ate a little more than on the former days. He asked the butler also for a bottle of Château-Laffitte, which he drank entirely. While taking his coffee, he smoked a cigar in the dining-room, contrary to the rules of the house. At half-past seven, according to Joseph and the two footmen, or at eight, according to the porter and Lubin, the viscount went out on foot, taking with him an umbrella. He returned at two o'clock in the morning, and dismissed at once his *valet de chambre*, whose duty it was to remain up for him.

Wednesday, on entering the viscount's room, the *valet de chambre* was struck with the condition in which he found his master's clothing. It was wet, and stained with mud ; the trousers were torn. He hazarded a remark upon them. Albert replied, in a furious manner, " Throw the old things in a corner, ready to be given away."

He appeared to be much better that day. He breakfasted with a good appetite ; and the butler perceived that he was in excellent spirits. He passed the afternoon in the library, and burned a pile of papers.

Thursday, he seemed again to suffer much. He seemed to regret not being able to see the count. That evening, after his interview with his father, he went to his room in a pitiable condition. Lubin wanted to go for the doctor : he would not allow it, saying, at the same time, there was nothing the matter with him.

Such was the substance of twenty large pages, which the long clerk had written without once turning his head to look at the witnesses who passed by in their fine livery.

This testimony Daburon managed to obtain inside of two hours. Being well aware of the importance of their testimony all these servants were very voluble. The difficulty was, to stop them when they were once started. And yet, from all they said, it appeared that Albert was a very good master—easily served, kind and polite to his servants. Wonderful to relate ! there were found only three among them all who did not appear perfectly delighted at the misfortune which had befallen the family. Two were seriously distressed. Lubin, although he had been an object of especial kindness, was not one of these last.

The turn of the commissary of police had now come. In a few words, he gave an account of the arrest, already described by Père Tabaret. He did not forget to mark the one word, " Lost," which had escaped Albert ; to his mind, it was a confession. He then delivered all the articles seized in the Viscount de Commarin's room.

The magistrate examined carefully all these articles, and compared them closely with the scraps of evidence gathered at Jonchère. He appeared now, more than ever, satisfied with his course.

He personally placed all the material proofs upon the table, and, to hide them, threw over them three or four of those large sheets of paper which are used by shirt-markers for covers.

The day was far advanced ; and Daburon had just sufficient time to examine the prisoner before night. Why should he hesitate now ? He had in his hands more proofs than would suffice to summon ten men before the court of assize, and send them from thence to Roquette. He was fighting with arms so immeasurably superior that, unless through some error of his own, Albert would scarcely dream of defending himself ; and yet, at this moment of so much solemnity to himself, he seemed to falter. Was his will enfeebled ? Would he abandon his resolution ?

He now, for the first time, remembered that he had tasted nothing since morning ; and he sent hastily for a bottle of wine, and some biscuits. It was not strength, however, that the judge needed ; it was courage. All the time that he was drinking, his thoughts would keep repeating this strange sentence, " I am going to appear before the Viscount de Commarin." At any other moment, he would have laughed at this flight of his thoughts ; but at this moment he seemed to see the will of Providence.

" So be it," said he ; " this is my punishment."

And immediately he gave the necessary orders for the Viscount Albert to be brought before him.

CHAPTER XII

There was little difference in Albert's state of mind at home and in the seclusion of the prison.

Snatched away from those painful dreams by the rude voice of the commissary, saying, " In the name of the law I arrest you," his spirit, completely overcome, was a long time in recovering its equilibrium. Everything that followed his arrest appeared to float indistinctly in a thick mist, like the fairy scenes at the theatre behind a quadruple gauze curtain.

To their questions he replied, without hearing himself speak. Two agents took his arms, and helped him down the stairs from the house. He could not have walked down alone. His limbs, which bent beneath him, could not have borne him. One thing alone he heard, a servant saying that the count had been struck with apoplexy ; but even that he soon forgot.

They raised him into the coach, which stood in the court, at the foot of the steps, rather ashamed of finding itself in such a place ; and they placed him upon the back seat. Two detectives took their seats in front of him ; while a third mounted the box by the side of the driver. During the drive, he did not at all realise his situation. He lay in the dirty, greasy carriage motionless. His body, which followed every jolt of the carriage, woefully in need of springs, rolled from one side to the other : and his head fell to and fro on his shoulders, as if the muscles of his neck were unstrung. He thought of the Widow Lerouge. He recalled her as she was when he went with his father to Jonchère. It was in the spring ; and the May flowers sweetened the way. The old woman, in a white head-dress, stood at her garden gate : she spoke with a suppliant air. The count listened to her with a stern glance ; then, taking some money from his pocket-book, he gave it to her. . . .

On reaching the jail, they got out of the carriage as they had entered it.

During the formalities of the jail-book, in the dark, offensive record office, replying mechanically to everything, he gave himself up with delight to recollections of Claire.

He went back to the time of their first love, when he doubted whether he should ever have the happiness of being loved by her in return, and to Madame Goello's house, where they had first exchanged their vows.

This old lady had a certain celebrated lovers' retreat, upon the left bank of the Seine, of the most peculiar description. Upon all the furniture, and even upon the mantel, were placed a dozen or fifteen stuffed dogs, of various kinds, which together or successively had helped to cheer the old maid's lonely hours. She loved to relate the stories of these pets, whose affections had never failed her. They were, too, such grotesque, horrible things. One especially, outrageously stuffed, seemed ready to burst. How many times he had laughed at it with Claire until the tears came !

They began searching him then. This crowning humiliation, when rough hands passed all over his body, brought him somewhat to himself, and roused his anger. But it was soon finished ; and they took him through the dark corridors, whose pavements were filthy and slippery. They opened a door, and pushed him into a sort of little cell. He heard behind him the sound of clashing bolts, and creaking locks.

He was a prisoner, and, in accordance with special orders, in solitary confinement. Immediately he felt a marked sensation of comfort. He was alone.

No more stifled whispers, harsh voices, dreadful questions, filled his ears. A profound silence, giving the idea of nothingness, formed about him. It seemed to him that he had never before escaped from society ; and he rejoiced at it. He would have felt relieved had this even been a tomb. His body, as well as his mind, was weighed down with weariness. He was going to sit down, when he perceived a mean couch, at the right, in front of the grated window, which let in the little light there was. This bed gave him as much pleasure as a plank would a drowning man. He threw himself upon it, and stretched himself with delight ; but he felt chilled. He found a coarse woollen coverlid, and, wrapping it about him, was soon sound asleep.

In the corridor, two agents of the safety police, one still young, the other already grey, alternately peered and listened at the peep-hole in the door.

" What a fellow he is ! " murmured the younger officer. " If a man has no more nerve than that, he ought to be

pretty honest. He will be wild the morning of his execution, eh, Balan ? "

" That depends," replied the other. " We must wait and see. Lecoq told me that he was a terrible rascal."

" Ah ! see how the fellow arranges his bed, and lies down. Can he be going to sleep ? That's good ! It's the first time I ever saw such a thing."

" It's because, comrade, that you have only had dealings with the smaller rogues. All great rascals—and I have had to do with more than one—are of this sort. At the moment of arrest, good night everyone ; their heart fails them ; but they recover themselves next day."

" Upon my word, if he hasn't gone to sleep ! What a joke ! "

" I tell you, my friend," added the old man, pointedly, " that nothing is more natural. I am sure that, since the blow was struck, this young fellow has hardly lived : his body has been all on fire. Now he knows that his secret is out ; and that quiets him."

" Ha, ha ! you are joking : you say that that quiets him? "

" Certainly. There is no greater punishment, remember, than anxiety ; anything is preferable. If you have only got ten thousand livres income, I will show you a way to prove this. Go to Hamburg and risk your entire fortune on one chance at *rouge et noir*. Tell me, afterwards, what your feelings were while the ball was rolling. It is, observe, as though they were tearing your brain with pincers, as if they were pouring molten lead into your bones, instead of marrow. This dread of detection is so strong that, when everything is lost, they are content ; they feel relieved ; they breathe again ; they say to themselves, ' Ah, it is finished at last.' They are ruined, demolished, overthrown ; but it is ended."

" Truly, Balan, one would think that you yourself had had just such an experience."

" Alas ! " sighed the officer, " It is to my love for the queen of spades, my unhappy love, that you owe the honour of looking through this peep-hole in my company. But this fellow has two hours for his nap ; do not lose sight of him : I am going to smoke a cigarette in the court."

Albert slept four hours. On awakening, his head seemed clearer than it had been any time since his interview with Noel. It was a terrible moment for him when, for the first time, he looked his situation calmly in the face.

" By this time," said he, " he has taken measures to prevent his being ousted."

He longed to see someone—to speak, to have questions asked, to explain. He wanted to cry out aloud.

" But what good would it do," he said to himself, " even if they came ? "

He looked for his watch, to see what time it was, and found that they had taken it away. This moved him deeply ; they were treating him like the most abandoned of villains. He felt in his pockets : they had all been carefully emptied. He thought now of his appearance ; and, throwing himself upon the couch, he repaired as much as possible the disorder of his toilet. He put his clothes in order, and dusted them ; he straightened his collar, and re-tied his cravat. Turning, then, a little water on his handkerchief, he passed it over his face, rubbing his eyes, the lids of which were smarting. Then he endeavoured to smooth his beard and hair. He had no idea that four lynx eyes were fixed upon him all the time.

" Good ! " murmured the young officer. " See how our cock raises his crest and smooths his feathers ! "

" I tell you," put in Balan, " he is simply benumbed. Hush ! he is speaking, I believe."

But they neither surprised one of those disordered gestures nor one of those incoherent speeches, which almost always escape from the feeble when excited by fears, or from the independent who believe their secrets secure. One word alone, " honour," reached the ears of the two spies.

" These rascals of rank," grumbled Balan, " always have this word in their mouths. What they fear most is the opinion of some dozen friends, and several thousand strangers, who read the *Journal des Tribunaux*. They care nothing about their own heads."

When the gendarmes came to conduct Albert to the examination, they found him seated on the side of his bed, his feet pressed against the iron bar, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands. He rose, as they entered, and took a few steps towards them ; but his throat was so dry that he was scarcely able to speak. He asked for a few moments' rest ; and, turning towards the little table, he filled and drank two large glasses of water in succession.

" I am ready," he then said.

And, with a firm step, he followed the gendarmes along the passage which led to the court.

Daburon was now in anguish. He walked furiously up and down his office, awaiting his prisoner. Again, and for the twentieth time since morning, he regretted his having engaged in the business.

" Confound this absurd ' honour,' " he exclaimed. " I have done wrong in not withdrawing. Nothing in the world can change my feelings against the young man. I hate him. I am his judge ; and it is no less true that I have longed to assassinate him. I once aimed at him with my revolver. Why did I not pull the trigger ? Do I know why ? What power held my finger, when an almost insensible pressure would have been enough ? I cannot say. Why is not he the judge, and I the assassin ? If the intention was as culpable as the deed, my neck would suffer. And is it under these conditions that I dare examine him ? "

Passing before the door, he heard the heavy step of the gendarmes in the gallery.

" Here he comes," he said aloud ; and then hastily took a seat behind the table, bending into the shade of the portfolio as though striving to hide himself. If the long clerk had had eyes, he would have noticed the singular spectacle of a judge more anxious than the prisoner. But he was blind to it ; and at this moment he saw only an error of fifteen centimes, which had slipped into his accounts, and which he was unable to rectify.

Albert entered the judge's office erect. His features bore traces of great fatigue and of long wakefulness. He was very pale ; but his eyes were clear and sparkling.

The usual questions which open such examinations gave Daburon time to recover himself. Fortunately he had found time in the morning to prepare a plan, which he had now simply to follow.

" You are not ignorant, monsieur," he commenced in a tone of perfect politeness, " that you have no right to the name you bear ? "

" I know, monsieur," replied Albert, " that I am the natural son of M. de Commarin. I know, further, that my father would be unable to recognise me if he wished, since I was born during his marriage."

" What were your feelings upon learning this ? "

" I should speak falsely, monsieur, if I said I did not feel very bitterly. When one is in the high position I occupied, the fall is terrible. However, I have never for a moment

thought of contesting Noel Gerdy's rights. I have always intended, and still intend, to yield. I have so informed M. de Commarin."

Daburon listened to this reply ; and it only strengthened his suspicions. Did it not enter into the line of defence which the prisoner had marked out for himself? It was his duty now to seek some way of breaking up this defence, in which the prisoner meant to shut himself up as in a shell.

" You could only oppose," continued the judge, " a plea of *non recevoir* to M. Gerdy. You had, indeed, on your side the count, and your mother ; but Gerdy had, on his side, testimony which it would have been necessary to suppress—that of the Widow Lerouge."

" I have never denied it, monsieur."

" Now," continued the judge, seeking to hide the look which he gave Albert, " Justice supposes that, to do away with the only existing proofs, you have assassinated the Widow Lerouge ! "

This terrible accusation, terribly emphasised, caused no change in Albert's features. He kept the same firm bearing, without braggadocio. Not a wrinkle appeared on his face.

" Before God," he answered, " and by all that is most sacred on earth, I swear to you, monsieur, that I am innocent ! I have been to this moment a close prisoner, without communication with the outer world, reduced, consequently, to the most absolute helplessness. It is through your probity that I hope to demonstrate my innocence."

" What an actor ! " thought the judge. " Can crime give such force ? "

He ran over the papers, reading certain passages of the preceding depositions, turning down the corners of certain pages which contained important information. Then suddenly he continued :

" When you were arrested, you cried out, ' I am lost.' What did you mean by that ? "

" Monsieur," replied Albert, " I remember having uttered those words. When I knew of what crime they accused me, I was overwhelmed with consternation. My spirit was, as it were, illuminated by a glimpse of futurity. In less than a moment, I perceived all the horrors of my situation. I saw the weight of the accusation, its probability, and the difficulties I should have in defending myself. A voice cried out to me, ' Who, then, is most interested in Claudine's

death ? ' And the knowledge of my imminent peril forced from me the exclamation you speak of."

His explanation was more than plausible, was possible, and even probable. It had the advantage, too, of anticipating the axiom :

Search out the one whom the crime will benefit ! Tabaret had spoken truly when he said that they had not taken an unskilful prisoner.

Daburon admired Albert's presence of mind, and the resources of his perverse imagination.

" You do, indeed," continued the judge, " appear to have had the most serious interest in this death. You see, we are very sure that robbery was not the object of the crime. The things thrown into the Seine have been recovered. We know, also, that all the papers were burnt. Could they compromise anyone but yourself ? If you know of anyone, speak."

" What can I answer, monsieur ? Nothing."

" Have you gone often to this woman's house ? "

" Three or four times, with my father."

" One of your coachmen pretends to have driven you there at least ten times."

" The man is mistaken. But what matters the number of visits ? "

" Do you recollect the arrangement of the rooms ? Can you describe them ? "

" Perfectly, monsieur : there were two. Claudine slept in the back room."

" It is understood that you were not unknown to the Widow Lerouge. If you had knocked some evening at her door, do you think she would have opened it for you ? "

" Certainly, monsieur, and eagerly."

" You have been unwell these last few days ? "

" Very unwell ; yes, monsieur, my body bent under the weight of a burden too great for my strength. I have not, however, lost my courage."

" Why did you forbid your *valet de chambre*, Lubin, to call the doctor ? "

" Ah, monsieur, how could the doctor reach my disease ? All his science could not make me the legitimate son of the Count de Commarin."

" Singular remarks made by you were overheard. You seemed to be no longer interested in anything about the house. You destroyed papers and letters."

" I had decided to leave the house, monsieur. My resolution explains all that."

To the judge's questions, Albert replied promptly, without the least embarrassment, and in a confident tone. His voice, of a sympathetic calibre, did not tremble. It concealed no emotion ; it retained its pure and vibrating sound.

Daburon believed it wise to suspend the examination. With an adversary of this strength, he was evidently pursuing a false course. To proceed in detail was folly ; they neither intimidated him nor made him break through his reserve.

" Monsieur," said the judge abruptly, " tell me exactly how you passed your time last Tuesday evening, from six o'clock until midnight ? "

For the first time, Albert seemed disconcerted. His eyes, which had, up to this time, been fixed upon the judge, wandered.

" During Tuesday evening," he stammered, repeating the phrase to gain time.

" I have hit it," thought the judge, starting with joy, and then added aloud : " Yes, from six o'clock until midnight."

" I am afraid, monsieur," answered Albert, " it will be difficult for me to satisfy you. I haven't a very good memory."

" Oh, don't tell me that ! " interrupted the judge. " If I had asked what you were doing three months ago, on a certain evening, and at a certain hour, I could account for your hesitation ; but this is about Tuesday, and it is now Friday. Moreover, this day, so close, was the last of the carnival ; it was Shrove Tuesday. That circumstance ought to help your memory."

" That evening I was walking," murmured Albert.

" Now," continued the judge, " where did you dine ? "

" At home, as usual."

" No, not as usual. At the end of your meal, you asked for a bottle of Bordeaux, which you emptied. You doubtless had need of some extra excitement for your subsequent plans."

" I had no plans," replied the prisoner, with a very evident uneasiness.

" You deceive yourself. Two friends came to seek you. You replied to them, before sitting down to dinner, that you had a very important engagement."

" That was only a polite way of getting rid of them."

" Why ? "

" Can you not understand, monsieur ? I was resigned, but not comforted. I was learning to get accustomed to the terrible blow. Does not one seek solitude in the great crises of one's life ? "

" The prosecution supposes that you wished to be left alone, that you might go to Jonchère. During the day you said, ' She cannot resist me.' Of whom were you speaking ? "

" Of someone to whom I had written the evening before, and who had replied to me. I spoke the words with her letter still in my hands."

" This letter was, then, from a woman ? "

" Yes."

" What have you done with it ? "

" I burned it."

" This precaution would seem to imply that you considered it as compromising."

" Not at all, monsieur ; it treated entirely of private matters."

Daburon was sure that this letter came from Mademoiselle d'Arlanges. Should he nevertheless ask it, and compel himself to again pronounce this name of Claire, so terrible to him ? He ventured to do so, hiding his face behind a paper, so that the prisoner did not detect his emotion.

" From whom did this letter come ? " he asked.

" From one whom I cannot name."

" Monsieur," said the judge, addressing him severely, " I will not conceal from you that your position is very dangerous. Do not aggravate it by this culpable reticence. You are here to tell everything, monsieur."

" My affairs alone, not those of others."

Albert gave this last answer in a dry tone. He was giddy, flurried, exasperated by the prying and irritating mode of the examination, which gave him no time to breathe. The judge's questions fell upon him more thickly than the blows of the blacksmith's hammer upon the red-hot iron which he is anxious to shape before it cools.

The apparent rebellion of his prisoner troubled Daburon seriously. He was, further, extremely surprised to find the discernment of the old detective at fault ; just as though Tabaret were infallible. Tabaret had predicted an unexceptionable alibi ; and this alibi was not forthcoming. Why ? Had this subtle villain something better than that ? What

ruse had he at the bottom of his bag ? Doubtless he kept in reserve some unforeseen stroke, perhaps irresistible.

" Gently," thought the judge. " I have not got him yet." Then he quickly said aloud :

" Go on. After dinner, what did you do ? "

" I went out for a walk."

" Not immediately. The bottle drank, you smoked in the dining-room, which was so unusual as to be noticed. What kind of cigars do you usually smoke ? "

" Trabucos."

" Do you not use a cigar-holder, to keep your lips from contact with the tobacco ? "

" Yes, monsieur," replied Albert, much surprised at this series of questions.

" What time did you go out ? "

" About eight o'clock."

" Did you carry an umbrella ? "

" Yes."

" Where did you go ? "

" I walked about the streets."

" Alone, without an object, all the evening ? "

" Yes, monsieur."

" Now trace out your wanderings for me exactly."

" Ah, monsieur, that is very difficult for me ! I went out simply to walk, to obtain exercise, to drive away the torpor which had depressed me for three days. I don't know whether you can picture to yourself my exact condition. I had lost my head. I moved about at hazard along the quays. I wandered through the streets——"

" All that is very improbable," interrupted the judge. Daburon, however, knew that it was possible. Had not he himself one night in a race of folly traversed all Paris ? What reply could he have made, if someone had asked him next morning where he had gone, except that he had not paid attention, and did not know? But he had forgotten this ; and his anguish, too, had much less reason for it than Albert's.

The inquiry commenced, he had caught the fever of investigation. He renewed his desire for the struggle, his passion for his calling.

He became again a judge of inquiry, like the fencing-master, who, practising with his dearest friend, elated by the clash of weapons, becomes excited, forgets himself, and kills him.

" So," continued Daburon, " you met absolutely no one who could affirm that he saw you ? You did not speak to a living soul ? You went in nowhere—not even into a café or a theatre ? "

" No, monsieur."

" Well, monsieur, it is a great misfortune for you—a very great misfortune ; for I must inform you that it was precisely during this Tuesday evening, between eight o'clock and midnight, that the Widow Lerouge was assassinated. The law can point to the exact hour. Again, monsieur, in your interests, I entreat you to reflect—to make a strong appeal to your memory."

This pointing out of the exact day and hour of the murder stunned Albert. He carried his hand to his forehead with a despairing gesture. But he replied in a calm voice :

" I am very unfortunate, monsieur ; but I have no explanation to make."

Daburon's surprise was profound. What, not an alibi ? Nothing ? This could be no snare nor system of defence. Was, then, this man as strong as he had imagined ? Doubtless ; but he had been taken unaware—caught unprovided. He had never imagined that it was possible for the accusation to fall upon him ; it could only do so by a miracle.

The judge raised slowly, and one by one, the large pieces of paper that covered the convicting articles seized in Albert's room.

" We will pass on," he continued, " to the examination of the charges which weigh against you. Will you please come nearer ? Do you recognise these articles as belonging to yourself ? "

" Yes, monsieur, they are all mine."

" Well, take this foil. Who broke it ? "

" I, monsieur, in fencing with M. Courtivois, who can bear witness to it."

" That will be inquired into. Where is the broken end ? "

" I do not know. Upon that point, you must ask my *valet de chambre*, Lubin."

" Exactly. He declares that he has hunted for it, and cannot find it. I must tell you that the victim received the fatal blow with the end of a foil, broken and sharpened. This piece of stuff, on which the assassin wiped his weapon, proves it."

" I beseech you, monsieur, to order a most minute search for this. It is impossible that the other half of the foil is not to be found."

" Orders have been given to that effect. See here, traced out on this paper, the exact imprint of the murderer's foot. I have applied it to the sole of one of your boots ; it, at once, you perceive, adapts itself with the utmost precision. This piece of plaster has been poured into the hollow left by your heel : you observe that it is, in all respects, your own heel. I perceive, too, the mark of a peg, which is also here."

Albert followed with marked anxiety the judge's every movement. It was plain that he was struggling against a growing terror. Was he attacked by that panic which stupefies criminals when they are on the point of being convicted ? To all remarks of the magistrate he replied in a dull voice :

" It is true—perfectly true."

" Wait," continued Daburon ; " listen further, before crying out. The criminal had an umbrella. The end of this umbrella sank in the mud ; the round of woodwork, which ends the cloth, was found moulded in the hollow. Here is this clod of mud, raised with the utmost care ; and here is your umbrella. Compare the rounds. Are they alike, or not ? "

" These things, monsieur," attempted Albert, " are wonderful coincidences."

" Well, that remains to be proved ; look at the end of this cigar, found at the scene of the crime, and tell of what brand it is, and how it was smoked."

" It is a Trabuco, and was smoked with a cigar-holder."

" Like these, eh ? " persisted the judge, showing the cigars and holders of amber and meerschaum, taken from the library mantel.

" Ah ! " murmured Albert, " it is a fatality—a wonderful coincidence."

" Patience ; that is nothing, as yet. The assassin of the Widow Lerouge wore gloves. The victim, in the convulsions of agony, seized the murderer's hands ; and these fragments of skin remained in her nails. These were preserved, and are here. They are of pearl grey, are they not ? Now here are the gloves which you wore on Tuesday. They are grey, and they are frayed. Compare these particles with your own gloves. Do they not correspond ? Are they not of the same colour, the same skin ? "

He could neither deny it, equivocate, nor find subterfuges. The evidence was there before his eyes. The brutal deed shone forth. While appearing to occupy himself solely with the objects lying upon his table, Daburon never lost sight of his prisoner. Albert was terrified. A cold perspiration bathed his face, and glided drop by drop down his cheeks. His hands trembled so much that they were of no use to him. With a choking voice he repeated :

" It is horrible, horrible ! "

" Finally," pursued the inexorable judge, " here are the trousers you wore on the evening of the murder. It is plain that they have been wet ; and, besides the mud, there are traces of moss. Observe, too, they are torn on the knees. We will admit, for the sake of argument, that you might not remember where you went on that evening ; but who could believe that you do not know where you tore your trousers and frayed your gloves ? "

What courage could resist such assaults ? Albert's firmness and energy were at an end. His brain whirled. He fell heavily into a chair, exclaiming :

" I shall go mad ! "

" You see," insisted the judge, whose gaze had become unbearably fixed upon him—" you see that the Widow Lerouge could only have been stabbed by you."

" I see," protested Albert, " that I am a victim of one of those terrible fatalities which make men doubt the evidence of their reason. I am innocent."

" Then tell me where you passed Tuesday evening."

" Ah, monsieur ! " cried the prisoner, " I must——" But, restraining himself, he added in a dull voice, " I have made the only answer that I can make."

Daburon arose, having now reached his final grand stroke.

" It is then, my duty," said he, with a shade of irony, " to supply your failure of memory. I am going to recount to you what you did. On Tuesday evening, at eight o'clock, excited with wine, you left your home. At thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at St. Lazare Station. At nine o'clock, you got out at Rueil Station."

And, adopting without shame the ideas of Père Tabaret, Daburon repeated nearly word for word the tirade which he had improvised the night before.

He had every reason, while speaking, to admire the penetration of the old detective. In all his life, his eloquence had

never produced so striking an effect. Every sentence, every word, carried weight. The assurance of the prisoner, already shaken, fell piece by piece, just as the walls of a town give way when riddled with balls.

Albert was, as the magistrate perceived, like a man who, rolling to the bottom of a precipice, sees all the points which might retard his fall fail him, and who feels a new and more painful bruise at each projecture against which his body strikes.

"And now," concluded Daburon, "listen to good advice: do not persist in this mode of denying, impossible to sustain. Change your mind. Justice, be assured, is ignorant of nothing which it is important to know. Believe me; seek the indulgence of the courts: confess your guilt."

Daburon did not believe that his prisoner would again refuse. He pictured him overwhelmed, confounded, throwing himself at his feet, asking for mercy. But he was deceived.

However great appeared Albert's prostration, he found in one last effort of his will sufficient strength to recover himself and again protest:

"You are right, monsieur," he said in a sad, but firm voice; "everything seems to prove the criminal. In your place, I should have spoken as you have done; and yet I swear to you that I am innocent."

"Upon my word——" began the judge.

"I am innocent," interrupted Albert; "and I repeat it, without the least hope of changing your conviction in any way. Yes, everything speaks against me—everything, even my own bearing before you. It is true, my courage has been shaken by these incredible, miraculous, overwhelming coincidences. I am overcome, because I feel the impossibility of establishing my innocence. But I do not despair. My honour and my life are in the hands of God. At the same time that I appear to you lost—for I do not deceive myself, monsieur—I do not despair of a complete justification. I await it confidently."

"What have you to say?" interrupted the judge.

"Nothing but what I have already said, monsieur."

"So you persist in denying your guilt?"

"I am innocent."

"But this is folly——"

"I am innocent."

"Very well," said Daburon; "that is enough for to-day.

You shall hear the reading of the official report, and will then be taken back to your prison. I exhort you to reflect. Night will perhaps bring on a better feeling ; if you wish at any time to speak to me, send word and I will come to you. I will give orders to that effect. You may read now, Constant."

When Albert departed with the gendarmes, he muttered in a low tone, " There's an obstinate fellow for you." He certainly had not a shadow of doubt. To him, Albert was as surely the murderer as if he heard him confess it. Even if he should persist in his purpose of denial to the end of the investigation, it would be impossible that, with the proofs already in existence, a verdict of " Not guilty " should be rendered. It was a hundred to one that to all the questions the jury would reply in the affirmative.

However, left to himself, Daburon did not experience that intense satisfaction, mixed with vanity, which is ordinarily felt after one has successfully conducted an examination when he has succeeded in getting his prisoner into Albert's state. Something disturbed him and shocked him. At the bottom of his heart, he felt ill at ease. He had triumphed ; but his victory gave him only uneasiness, pain, and vexation. A reflection so simple that he could hardly understand why it had not occurred to him before increased his discontent, and made him angry with himself.

" Something told me," he muttered, " that I was wrong to undertake this business. I am punished for not having obeyed this inner voice. I must excuse myself from going on with it. This Viscount de Commarin has been arrested, imprisoned, examined, overpowered : he will certainly be convicted, and probably condemned. Had I been a stranger to the trial, I could have appeared in Claire's presence. Her grief would have been great. As her friend, I could have soothed her, mingled my tears with hers, calmed her regrets. With time, she might have been consoled—perhaps have forgotten him. She might, perhaps, then have rewarded me ; who knows ? While now, whatever may happen, I shall be an object of terror to her ; she will never be able to endure the sight of me. I shall always in her eyes be the assassin of her lover. I have with my own hands formed between her and myself an abyss which centuries can never fill, by my own great fault."

The unhappy judge heaped the bitterest reproaches upon himself. He was in despair. He had never so hated Albert—

this wretched man, who, stained with a crime, stood in the way of his happiness. Then how he cursed Père Tabaret ! Alone, he could not have decided so quickly. He would have thought it over, matured his decision, and certainly recollected the inconveniences, which now occurred to him. This man, like a badly trained bloodhound, urged on and carried away by his stupid passion, had become confused.

It was precisely this unfavourable moment that Tabaret chose for making his appearance before the judge. He had been informed of the termination of the inquiry ; and he arrived, impatient to know what had passed, swelling with curiosity, his nose in air, distended with the sweet hope of hearing of the fulfilment of his predictions.

" What answer did he make ? " he asked almost before he had opened the door.

" He is evidently the criminal," replied the judge, with a harshness very different from his usual manner.

Père Tabaret, who had expected to receive praises by the basketful, was surprised at this tone ! It was, therefore, with much hesitation that he offered his further services.

" I have come," he said modestly, " to know if any investigations are necessary to demolish the alibi offered by the prisoner."

" He gave no alibi," replied the magistrate dryly.

" How," cried the old detective, " no alibi ? Pshaw ! I ask pardon : he has, of course, then confessed everything."

" No," said the judge impatiently, " he has confessed nothing. He acknowledges that the proofs are decisive ; he cannot give an account of how he spent his time ; but he protests his innocence."

In the centre of the office, Tabaret, his mouth wide open, his eyes starting wildly, stood in the most grotesque attitude his astonishment could effect. He was literally thunderstruck.

In spite of his anger, Daburon could not help smiling ; and even Constant gave a grin, which on his lips was equivalent to a paroxysm of laughter.

" Not an *alibi*, nothing ? " murmured the old fellow. " No explanations ? The idea ! It is inconceivable. Not an alibi ? We must be mistaken : he is certainly not the criminal. It cannot be at all ! "

The judge of inquiry felt that the old amateur must have been waiting the result of the examination at the wine-shop around the corner, or else that he had gone mad.

" Unfortunately," said he, " we are not mistaken. It is too clearly shown that M. de Commarin is the murderer. But, if you like, ask Constant for his report of the examination, and run it over while I put these papers in order."

" Very well," said the old fellow, with feverish anxiety.

He sat down in Constant's chair, and, leaning his elbows on the table, burying his hands in his hair, in less than no time read through the report. When he had finished, he arose wild, pale, his face distorted.

" Monsieur," said he to the magistrate in a strange voice, " I have been the involuntary cause of a terrible mistake. This man is innocent."

" Come, come," said Daburon, without stopping his preparations for departure, " you are losing your head, my dear Tabaret. How, after all that you have read there, can—— ? "

" Yes, monsieur, yes ; it is because I have read this that I entreat you to pause, or we shall add one more to the sad list of judicial errors. Read this examination over carefully ; there is not a reply which does not declare this unfortunate man innocent—not one word which does not throw out a ray of light. And he is still in prison, still in solitary confinement ? "

" He is ; and there he will remain, if you please," broke in the judge. " It becomes you well to speak in this manner, after the way you talked last night, while I hesitated so much."

" But, monsieur," cried the old detective, " I say now precisely the same. Ah, wretched Tabaret ! all is lost ; and they will not understand you. Pardon me, monsieur, if I lack the respect due to your office ; but you have not grasped my method. It is, however, very simple. Given a crime, with all the circumstances and details, I construct, piece by piece, a plan of accusation, which I do not warrant until it is entire and perfect. If a man is found to whom this plan applies exactly in every particular, the author of the crime is found ; otherwise, we have laid hands upon an innocent person. It is not sufficient that such and such particulars seem to point to him ; it must be all or nothing. This is infallible. Now, in this case, how have I reached the criminal ? By proceeding by inference from the known to the unknown. I have examined his work ; and I have formed an idea of the worker. Reason and logic lead us to what ? To

a villain, determined, courageous, and prudent, versed in the business. And do you think that such a man would neglect a precaution that would not be omitted by the commonest tyro ? It is inconceivable. What ! This man is so skilful as to leave such feeble traces that they escaped Gevrol's practised eye ; and you think he would risk discovery by leaving an entire night unaccounted for ? It's impossible ! I am as sure of my system as of a well-proved rule of arithmetic. The Jonchère assassin had an alibi. Albert has offered none ; then he is innocent."

Daburon looked at the old detective pityingly—much as he would look at a remarkable monomaniac. When he had finished :

" My worthy M. Tabaret," he said to him, " you are entirely in the wrong. You err through an excess of subtlety. You allow too freely to others the wonderful sagacity with which you yourself are endowed. Our man has failed in prudence simply because he believed his rank would place him above suspicion."

" No, monsieur—no, a thousand times no. My criminal—the true one—he whom we have yet to find, would dread everything. Besides, does Albert defend himself ? No. He is overwhelmed ; because he perceives the coincidences so fatal that they appear to condemn him, without a chance of escape. Did he try to excuse himself ? No. He simply replied, ' It is terrible.' And then this reticence that I cannot explain."

" I can explain it very easily ; and I am as confident as though he had confessed everything. I have more than sufficient proofs for that."

" Ah, monsieur, those proofs ! There are always enough of those against an arrested man. They have existed against every innocent man who was ever condemned. Proofs ! Why, I had them in quantities against Kaiser, the poor little tailor, who——"

" Well," interrupted the judge hastily, " if he is not the one most interested in the crime, who is ? His father, the Count de Commarin ? "

" No ; the true assassin is a young man."

Daburon had arranged his papers, and finished his preparations. He took up his hat, and, as he was going out, replied :

" Adieu ! Come and see me by and by, Tabaret, when

you have got rid of these fancies. To-morrow we will talk the whole matter over again. I am rather tired to-night." Then he added, addressing his clerk, " Constant, bring me word, in the court of records, in case the prisoner Commarin wishes to speak to me."

He had reached the door ; but Tabaret barred his exit.

" Monsieur," said the old man, " in the name of heaven listen to me ! He is innocent, I swear to you. Help me, then, to find the real criminal. Monsieur, think of your remorse in case you take this false step."

But the magistrate did not wish to hear more. He pushed Père Tabaret quickly aside, and hastened into the gallery.

The old man now turned to Constant. He wished to convince, persuade, prove to him. Lost trouble : the tall clerk hastened to fold up his baggage, thinking of his soup, which was growing cold.

Having closed the study door, Père Tabaret, wretched in spirit, was alone in the dark gallery. The noise of the courts was hushed : all was silent as the tomb. The old detective desperately grasped his hair with both hands.

" Ah ! " said he, " Albert is innocent ; and it is I who have betrayed him. I, like a madman, have infused into the obstinate spirit of this judge a conviction that I can no longer control. He is innocent, and is yet enduring the most horrible anguish. If he should commit suicide ! There have been instances of wretched men who have killed themselves, in despair, in their prison. Poor boy ! But I will not abandon him. I have ruined him : I will save him ! I must, I will, find the criminal ; and he shall pay dearly for my mistake —the scoundrel ! "

CHAPTER XIII

After seeing the Count de Commarin safely in his carriage at the entrance of the Palais de Justice, Noel Gerdy seemed inclined to leave him.

Resting one hand against the half-opened carriage-door, he bowed respectfully, and said :

" When shall I have the honour of paying my respects to you, monsieur ? "

" Come with me now," said the old man.

The advocate, still leaning forward, muttered some

excuses. He had, he said, important business : he must positively return to his rooms at once.

" Come," repeated the count, in a tone which admitted of no reply.

Noel obeyed.

" You have found your father," said M. de Commarin in a low tone ; " but I must warn you that you at the same time lose your independence."

The carriage started ; and now, for the first time, the count noticed that Noel had very modestly taken his seat opposite him. This modest bearing pleased him much.

" Sit here, by my side, monsieur," he said ; " are you not my son ? "

The advocate, without replying, took his seat by the side of the old man, but as far from him as possible.

He had received a terrible shock in Daburon's presence ; for he retained none of his usual boldness, none of that *sang-froid* by which he was accustomed to conceal his feelings. Fortunately, the ride gave him time to breathe, and to recover himself a little.

On the way from the Palais de Justice to their home, not a word passed between the father and son.

When the carriage stopped before the flight of stairs, and the count got out with Noel's assistance, there was great commotion among the servants.

There were, it is true, few of them present, nearly all having been summoned to the Palais ; but the count and the advocate had scarcely disappeared, when, as if by enchantment, they were all assembled in the entry. They came from the garden, the stables, the cellar, and the kitchen. Nearly all bore marks of their calling. One young groom ran about with his wooden shoes filled with straw, shuffling on the marble floor like a mangy dog on the Gobelin tapestry. One of these fellows recognised Noel from his visit of the previous Sunday ; and that was enough to set fire to all these lovers of gossip, thirsting for scandal.

Since morning, moreover, the unusual events at the Commarin house had started a great uproar in society. A thousand stories were circulated, talked over, corrected, and added to by the ill-natured and malicious—some abominably absurd, others simply idiotic. Twenty people, very noble and still more proud, had not been too proud to send their most intelligent servants to pay a little visit

among the count's servants, for the sole purpose of learning something positive. As it was, nobody knew anything ; and yet everybody was fully informed.

Let anyone explain who can this very common phenomenon : a crime is committed ; justice arrives, wrapping itself in mystery ; the police are still ignorant of almost everything ; and yet details of the most minute character are circulated about the streets.

" Ah," said a cook, " that great dark fellow with the whiskers is the count's true son ! "

" You are right," said one of the servants who had accompanied M. de Commarin ; " as for the other, he is no more his son than Jean here ; who, by the way, will be kicked out of doors if he is caught in here with his dirty working-shoes on."

" Likely story," exclaimed Jean, smiling a little at the danger which threatened him.

" He has been expected all the time," said the cook.

" Why, how is that ? "

" Well, you see, one day, long ago, when the countess, who is now dead, was out walking with her little son, who was about six months old, the child was stolen by gypsies. The poor lady was full of grief ; but, above all, feared her husband, who was not kind to her. What was to be done ? She purchased a brat from an old woman who happened to be passing ; and, never having noticed his child, the count has never known the difference since."

" But the assassination ? "

" That's very simple. When the woman saw her brat in such a nice berth, she bled him finely, and has kept up a system of blackmailing all along. So he resolved to put an end to it, and came to a final settling with her."

" And this brown fellow—what about him ? "

The orator would have gone on, without doubt, giving the most satisfactory explanations of everything, if he had not been interrupted by the entrance of Lubin, who came from the Palais in company with young Joseph. His success, so brilliant up to this time, was cut short, just as that of an inferior singer when the star comes on the stage. The entire assembly turned towards Albert's *valet de chambre*, all eyes questioning him. He knew at once that he was a man of importance ; but he did not abuse his advantages, and make his little world languish too long.

" What a rascal ! " he cried out. " What a villainous fellow is this Albert ! "

He purposely did away with " monsieur " and " viscount," and met with general approval for so doing.

" But," he added, " I always had my doubts. The fellow didn't please me by half. Just see what we are exposed to every day in our profession. It is dreadfully disagreeable. The judge concealed nothing from me. ' Lubin,' said he, ' it was very wrong for a man like you to serve such a scoundrel.' For you must know, that, besides an old woman of about eighty, he also killed a young girl of twelve. The little child, the judge told me, was chopped into bits."

" Ah ! " put in Joseph ; " he must have been a brute. How they will give it to him for such a deed, even though he is rich ; for they always punish poor men, who do it simply to gain a living ! "

" Pshaw ! " said Lubin in a knowing tone ; " you will see him come out of it as pure as snow. These rich men can do anything."

" But," said the cook, " I'd give willingly a month's wages to be a mouse, and to listen to what the proud count and the tall brown fellow are talking about. If I could only get a little peep through the keyhole."

This proposition did not meet with much favour. The servants knew by experience that, on important occasions, spying was worse than useless.

M. de Commarin knew all about servants from infancy. His study was, therefore, a shelter to all imprudence. The sharpest ear placed at the keyhole could understand nothing of what was going on within, even when the count was in a passion, and his voice loudest. One alone, Denis, *monsieur le premier*, as they called him, had the opportunity of gathering information ; but he was well paid for being discreet ; and he was discretion itself.

At this time, M. de Commarin was sitting in the same chair which he had beaten with such a furious hand while listening to Albert.

From the moment he touched the step of his carriage, the old gentleman recovered his haughtiness. He became even more arrogant in his manner, as if he felt the mortification of his attitude before the judge, and wished himself dead for what he now considered an unpardonable weakness.

He wondered how he could have yielded to a momentary

impulse—how his grief could have so basely betrayed him.

At the remembrance of the avowals wrested from him in his wildness, he blushed, and called himself the worst of names.

Like Albert, the night before, Noel, having recovered himself fully, held himself erect, cold as marble, respectful, but no longer humble.

The father and son exchanged glances which had nothing of sympathy nor of friendliness.

They examined one another ; they measured each other, much as two adversaries feel their way with their eyes before encountering with their weapons.

" Monsieur," finally said the count in a hard tone, " henceforth this house is yours. From this moment, you are the Viscount de Commarin ; you re-enter into the fullness of the rights of which you have been deprived. Wait. Listen, before you thank me. I wish, in the beginning, to relieve you from all misunderstanding. Had I been master of the situation, I should never have recognised you : Albert should have remained in the position in which I placed him."

" I understand you, monsieur," replied Noel. " I don't think that I could ever bring myself to do an act like that by which you deprived me of my birthright ; but I declare that, if I had the misfortune to have done it, I should have thereafter acted as you have. Your rank was too conspicuous to permit a voluntary acknowledgment. It was a thousand times better to suffer an injustice to continue in secret than to expose your name to the comments of the malicious."

This answer surprised the count, and very agreeably. But he would not let his satisfaction be seen ; and it was with a still harder tone that he continued :

" I have no claim, monsieur, upon your affection ; I do not ask for it ; but I insist at all times upon the utmost deference. It is traditional in our house that the son shall never interrupt his father when he is speaking ; that you have just been guilty of. Children are not to judge their parents ; that also you have just done. When I was forty years of age my father was in his second childhood ; but I do not remember having raised my voice once above his. This much said by way of caution, I continue. I have undergone considerable expense in providing Albert with an establishment distinct from my own—with servants, horses, and carriages ; and I have allowed the unhappy boy

four thousand francs a month. I have decided, in order to put a stop to all foolish gossip, and to make your position the easier, that you ought to hold a more important place in the house, this for my own sake. Further, I will increase your monthly allowance to six thousand francs ; which I trust you will spend as nobly as possible, giving the least possible chance for ridicule. I cannot too strongly exhort you to the utmost caution. Keep close watch over yourself. Weigh your words well. Reason about your slightest actions. You will be the point of observation for thousands of impertinent idlers who compose our world ; your blunders will be their delight. Do you fence ? "

" Moderately well."

" So. Do you ride ? "

" No ; but in six months I will be a good horseman or break my neck."

" It is fashionable to be a horseman, not to break one's neck. Let us proceed. You will, of course, not occupy Albert's apartments. They will be closely locked, as soon as they are free from the police. Thank heaven ! the house is large. You will occupy the other wing ; and there will be a separate entrance to your apartments, by a separate staircase. Servants, horses, carriages, furniture, such as becomes a viscount, will be at your service, cost what it may, within forty-eight hours. On the day of your taking possession, you must look as though you had been installed for years. There will be great scandal ; but that cannot be avoided. A prudent father might send you away for a few months to the Austrian Court, or to the Russian ; but, in this instance, such prudence would be absurd. Much better a dreadful outcry, which ends quickly, than low murmurs which last for ever. Dare public opinion ; and in a week it will have exhausted its comments, and the story will have become old. This evening the workmen shall be here ; and, in the first place, I must present you to my servants."

To put this purpose into execution, the count moved to touch the bell-rope. Noel stopped him.

Since the commencement of this interview, the advocate had wandered in the regions of the thousand and one nights, the wonderful lamp in his hand. The fairy reality cast into the shade his wildest dreams. He was dazzled at the words of the count, and had need of all his reason to struggle against the giddiness which came over him, at realising his

great good fortune. Touched by a magic wand, he seemed to awake to a thousand novel and unknown sensations. He rolled in purple and bathed in gold.

But he knew how to appear unmoved. His face had contracted the habit of guarding the secret of the most violent inner excitement. While all his passions vibrated within him, he listened apparently with a sad and almost indifferent coldness.

" Permit me," he said to the count, " without overstepping the bounds of the utmost respect, to say a few words. I am touched more than I can express by your goodness ; and yet I beseech you to delay its manifestation. The proposition I am about to suggest may perhaps appear to you worthy of consideration. It seems to me that the situation demands the greatest delicacy. It is well to despise public opinion, but not to defy it. I am certain to be judged with the utmost severity. If I instal myself so suddenly in your house, what will they not say ? I shall have the appearance of a conqueror, who thinks little, in attaining his purpose, of passing over the bodies of the conquered. They will reproach me with occupying the bed still warm from Albert's body. They will rail bitterly at my haste in taking possession. They will certainly compare me to Albert; and the comparison will be to my disadvantage, because I seem to triumph at a time when a great disaster has fallen upon our house."

The count listened without marked disapproval, struck perhaps by the justice of his reasons.

Noel imagined that his hardness was much more feigned than real ; and this idea encouraged him.

" I beseech you then, monsieur," he continued, " to permit me for the present in no way to change my mode of living. By not showing myself, I leave all malicious remarks to waste themselves in air—I let public opinion the better familiarise itself with the idea of a coming change. There is a great deal in not taking the world by surprise. By waiting, I shall not have the air of an intruder on presenting myself. Absent, I shall have the advantage which the unknown always possess—I shall draw to myself the good opinion of all those who have envied Albert ; I shall obtain as defenders all those servants who would to-morrow assail me, if my elevation came suddenly upon them. Besides, by this delay I should accustom myself to my abrupt change of fortune. I ought not to bring into your

world, which is now mine, the manners of a parvenu. My name ought not to incommode me, like an ill-made coat. And, by thus acting, it will be possible for me to rectify, at home and without noise, the mistakes of my early education."

" Perhaps it would be the wisest," murmured the count.

This assent, so easily obtained, surprised Noel. He got the idea that the count had only wished to prove him, to test him. In any case, whether he had triumphed by his eloquence, or whether he had simply shunned a trap, he had triumphed. His boldness increased ; he determined to make himself master in every way.

" I must add, monsieur," he continued, " that I have certain changes to bring about in myself. Before entering upon duties in my new life, I ought to finish those in my old. I have friends and clients. This event has surprised me, just as I was beginning to reap the reward of ten years of hard work and perseverance. I had yet only sown ; I was on the point of gathering in my harvest. My name was already rising. I had obtained some little influence. I confess, without shame, that I have heretofore professed ideas and opinions that would not be suited to this house ; and it would be impossible to-day or to-morrow for——"

" Ah ! " interrupted the count in a bantering tone, " you were a liberal. It is a fashionable disease. Albert was a great liberal."

" My ideas, monsieur," said Noel eagerly, " were those of every intelligent man who wishes to rise. Besides, have not all parties one and the same aim—power ? They merely take different means of reaching it. I will not enlarge upon this subject. Be assured, monsieur, that I will respect my name, and think and act as a man of my rank should."

" I trust so," said M. de Commarin ; " and I hope that you will never make me regret Albert."

" At least, monsieur, it will not be my fault. But, since you have mentioned the name of that unfortunate young man, let us speak of him."

The count cast a look of defiance upon Noel.

" What can now be done for Albert ? " he asked.

" What, monsieur ! " cried Noel, with ardour, " would you abandon him, when he has not a friend left in the world ? He is still your son, monsieur ; he is my brother. For thirty years he has borne the name of Commarin. All the members of a family are one. Innocent, or guilty, he has

a right to count upon us ; and we owe him our assistance."

This was another of those sentiments which the count recognised as Albert's ; and this second one again touched him.

" What do you, then, hope for, monsieur ? " he asked.

" To save him, if he is innocent ; and I love to believe that he is. I am an advocate, monsieur ; and I wish to defend him. I have been told that I have considerable talent ; in such a cause, I must have. Yes, however strong the charges against him may be, I will overthrow them. I will dispel all doubts. The truth shall burst forth through my voice. I will find new accents to imbue the judges with my conviction. I will save him ; and this shall be my last cause."

" And if he should confess," said the count, " if he should confess ? "

" Then, monsieur," replied Noel, with a dark look, " I will render him the last service, which in such a misfortune I should ask of a brother—the means of avoiding judgment."

" That is well said, monsieur," said the count—" very well, my son."

And he extended his hand to Noel, who pressed it, bowing with a respectful acknowledgment.

The advocate breathed again. At last he had found the way to the heart of this haughty noble ; he had conquered, he had pleased him.

" Let us return to ourselves," continued the count. " I yield to the reasons which you have suggested. But do not consider this a precedent. I never retire from a plan once undertaken, unless it is proved to me to be bad, and contrary to my interests. But at least nothing need prevent your remaining here to-day, and dining with me. We will, in the first place, see where you can lodge until you formally take possession of the apartments which are to be prepared for you."

Noel ventured to interrupt the old gentleman again.

" Monsieur," said he, " when you bade me follow you here, I obeyed you, as was my duty. Now another and a sacred duty calls me away. Madame Gerdy is at this moment expiring. Ought I to leave the death-bed of her who filled my mother's place ? "

" Valerie ! " murmured the count.

He leaned upon the arm of his chair, his face buried in his hands ; in one moment the whole past rose up before him.

" She has done me great harm," he murmured, as if answering his thoughts. " She has ruined my whole life ;

but ought I to be implacable? She is dying from the accusation which is hanging over our son, Albert. It was I who was the cause of it all. Doubtless, in this last hour, a word from me would be a great consolation to her. I will accompany you, monsieur."

Noel started at this unexpected proposition.

"Oh, monsieur!" said he hastily, "spare yourself, pray, a heart-rending sight. Your going would be useless; Madame Gerdy probably yet exists; but her mind is dead. Her brain was unable to resist so violent a shock. The unfortunate woman would neither recognise nor understand you."

"Go, then, alone," sighed the count—"go, my son."

The words "my son," pronounced with a marked emphasis, sounded like a note of victory in Noel's ears, which only his studied reserve concealed.

He bowed to take his leave. The old gentleman signed him to stay.

"In any event," he said, "a place at table will be set for you here. I dine at precisely half-past six. I shall be glad to see you."

He rang. *Monsieur le premier* appeared. "Denis," said he, "none of the orders I have given will affect this gentleman. You will tell this to all the servants. This gentleman is at home here."

The advocate took his leave; and the count felt great comfort in being once more alone.

Since morning, events had followed one another with such bewildering rapidity that his thoughts could scarcely keep pace with them. At last he was able to reflect.

"There, then," said he to himself, "is my legitimate son. I am sure of his birth, at any rate. Truly it would be with a bad grace, were I to deny him. I find him an exact picture of myself at thirty. He is a fine fellow, this Noel, very fine. His features are decidedly in his favour. He is intelligent and acute. He knows how to be humble without lowering himself, firm without arrogance. His new and unexpected fortune does not make him giddy. I augur well of a man who knows how to bear himself in prosperity. He thinks well. He will carry his title proudly. And yet I feel no sympathy with him; it seems to me that I shall regret my poor Albert. I never knew how to appreciate him. Unhappy boy! To commit a dreadful crime! He must have lost his reason. I do not like the sight of this one: he is too

clever. They say that he is perfect. He expresses, at least, the noblest and most appropriate sentiments. He is kind and brave, magnanimous, generous, heroic. He is without malice, and is ready to sacrifice himself to repay me for what I have done for him. He forgives Madame Gerdy ; he loves Albert. That makes me distrust him. But all young men nowadays are so. Ah ! we live in a happy age. Our children are born free from all human mistakes. They have none of the vices, passions, nor prejudices of their fathers ; and these precocious philosophers, models of sagacity and virtue, are incapable of committing the least folly. Alas ! Albert, too, was perfect ; and he has assassinated Claudine ! That might imply—but what matters it ? " he added, half aloud. " I wish I had gone to see Valerie ! "

And, although the advocate had been gone at least ten good minutes, M. de Commarin, not realising how time had passed, hastened to the window, in the hope of seeing Noel in the yard, and hailing him.

But Noel had already gone. On leaving the house, he had taken a cab as far as the Rue Bourgoyne, and from thence to the Rue St. Lazare.

Arrived at his own door, he threw rather than gave five francs to the driver, and ran rapidly up to the fourth story.

" Who has called upon me ? " he asked of the maid.

" No one, monsieur."

He seemed relieved from a great anxiety, and spoke again in a calmer tone.

" And the doctor ? "

" He came this morning," replied the maid, " while you were away ; and he did not seem at all confident. He has returned every hour, and is now here."

" Very well. I am going in to speak to him. If anyone calls, show him into my study, and call me."

While entering Madame Gerdy's chamber, Noel wondered how he could discover whether anyone had been in during his absence.

The sick woman, her eyes fixed, her face convulsed, lay extended upon her back.

She seemed dead, save for sudden starts, which at intervals shook her and disturbed the bedclothes.

Above her head was placed a little vessel, filled with ice-water, which fell drop by drop upon her face and upon her forehead, covered with large, bluish spots.

The table and mantel were laden with little pots, ornamented with strings of roses, vials for medicines, and half-emptied glasses.

At the foot of the bed, a piece of linen stained with blood showed that they had been using leeches.

Near the fireplace, where burned a large fire, a nun of the order of St. Vincent de Paul was crouching, watching a kettle boil.

She was a woman still young, her face whiter than her skirt. Her features were immovably placid, her look mournful, betraying the renunciation of the flesh, and the abdication of all independence of thought.

Her dress of grey hung from her in large, ungraceful folds. At her every motion, her large bead-roll of dyed box-wood, weighed down by a cross and copper medals, was shaken, and dragged on the ground with a noise like a chain.

Upon a chair opposite the bed Dr. Hervé sat, following apparently with close attention the sister's preparations. He raised himself eagerly, as Noel entered.

" At last you are here," he said, giving his friend a strong grasp of the hand.

" I was detained at the Palais," said the advocate, as if he felt the necessity of explaining his absence ; " and I have been, as you may well imagine, dreadfully anxious."

He bent down to the doctor's ear, and, with his voice trembling with anxiety, asked :

" Well ? "

The doctor shook his head with an air of deep discouragement.

" She is much worse," he replied ; " since morning, bad symptoms have succeeded each other with frightful rapidity."

He checked himself. The advocate seized his arm, and pinched it. Madame Gerdy had stirred a little, and let a feeble groan escape her.

" She understood you," murmured Noel.

" I wish it were so," said the doctor ; " it would be most encouraging. But you are mistaken. However, go to her."

He approached Madame Gerdy, and, taking her pulse, examined it carefully ; then, with the end of his finger, he lightly raised the eyelid.

The eye appeared dull, glassy, lifeless.

" Come, judge for yourself ; take her hand, speak to her."

Noel, trembling all over, obeyed his friend. He advanced, and, leaning on the bed so that his mouth almost touched her ear, he murmured :

" Mother, it is I—Noel—your own Noel. Speak to me, make some sign, if you know me, mother."

It was in vain ; she retained her frightful immobility. Not a sign of intelligence crossed her features.

" You see," said the doctor, " I told you the truth."

" Poor woman ! " sighed Noel, " does she suffer ? "

" Not now."

The nun now rose ; and she too came near the bed.

" Doctor," said she, " it is all ready."

" Then call the maid, sister, to help us. We are going to apply a mustard poultice."

The servant hastened in. In the arms of the two women, Madame Gerdy was like a corpse, whose last toilet they were making. She was rigid as though she were dead. She must have suffered much and long, poor woman ! for it was pitiable to see how thin she was. The nun herself was affected, although she had become habituated to the sight of suffering. How many sick people had breathed their last in her arms during the fifteen years that she had gone from pillow to pillow !

Noel, during this time, had retired into the recess of the window, and pressed his burning brow against the panes.

Of what was he thinking, while she was dying a few paces from him—she who had given him so many proofs of maternal tenderness and devotion ? Did he regret her ? Did he not think rather of the grand and magnificent existence which was awaiting him on the other side of the river, at the Faubourg St. Germain ? He turned abruptly about, upon hearing the voice of his friend.

" It is done," said the doctor ; " we have only now to wait the effect of the mustard. If she feels it, it will be a good sign ; if it has no effect, we will try cupping."

" And if she never stirs ? "

The doctor answered only with a shrug of the shoulders, which showed his feeling of absolute powerlessness.

" I understand your silence, Hervé," murmured Noel. " Alas ! you fear that to-night she is lost."

" Scientifically, yes ; but I do not yet despair. It is hardly a year ago that the grandfather of one of our comrades was saved in an almost identical case ; and I have

seen worse cases than this—where suppuration had commenced."

"It breaks my heart to see her in that state. Must she die without recovering her reason for one moment? Will she not recognise me, speak one word to me?"

"Who knows? This disease, my poor friend! baffles all foresight. Each moment the aspect may change, according as the inflammation affects such or such a part of the encephalic mass. She is now in a state of utter insensibility, of the destruction of all her intellectual faculties, of drowsiness, of paralysis; to-morrow, she may be taken with convulsions, accompanied with a lightness of the brain, a fierce delirium."

"And will she speak then?"

"Without doubt; but that will not change either the nature or the gravity of the disease."

"And will she recover her reason?"

"Perhaps," answered the doctor, looking fixedly at his friend; "but why do you ask that?"

"Ah, my dear Hervé, one word from Madame Gerdy—only one, would be of such use to me!"

"In your affairs, eh? Well, I can tell you nothing, can promise you nothing. You have chances in your favour, and chances against you; only do not be far away. If her intelligence returns, it will be only by flashes; try and profit by them. But I must go," added the doctor: "I have still three visits to make."

Noel followed his friend. When he reached the staircase:

"You will return?" he asked.

"This evening, at nine. There is no need of me at present. All depends upon the watcher. But I have chosen a pearl. I know her well."

"It was you, then, who brought this nun?"

"Yes, with your permission. Are you displeased?"

"Not the least in the world. Only, I confess——"

"What, you make a face? Perhaps you object to having your mother nursed by a daughter of St. Vincent?"

"My dear Hervé, you——"

"Well, I agree with you entirely. They are adroit, insinuating, dangerous, I know. If I had an old uncle, whose heir I expected to be, I shouldn't bring one of these into my house. These good daughters are sometimes charged with strange commissions. But what is there to fear now?

Let them speak their foolish words. Money aside, these good sisters are the best nurses in the world. I hope you will have one on your death-bed. But good-bye ; I am in a hurry."

So, regardless of his professional dignity, the doctor jumped down the stairs ; while Noel, thoughtful, his face charged with anxiety, went back into Madame Gerdy's room.

Upon the threshold of the sick-room, the nun awaited the advocate's return.

" Monsieur," said she, " monsieur."

" You want something of me, sister ? "

" Monsieur, the maid bade me come to you for money ; she has no more, and had to get credit at the apothecary's."

" Excuse me, sister," interrupted Noel in no very eager tone—" excuse me for not having anticipated your request ; but you see I am a little confused."

And, taking out a hundred-franc note, he laid it on the mantel.

" Thanks, monsieur," said the sister ; " I will keep account of all expenses. We always do this," she added ; " it is more convenient for the family—one is so troubled at seeing one we love sick. You have perhaps not thought of giving this poor lady the sweet aid of our beloved religion ? In your place, monsieur, I should send without delay for a priest——"

" Why, sister, you see the condition she is in ! She is practically dead ; you saw that she did not heed my voice."

" That is of little consequence, monsieur," replied the sister : " you ought always to do your duty. She did not reply to you ; but are you sure that she would not reply to a priest ? Ah, you do not understand all the power of the last rites ! I have seen even the dying revive their intelligence and strength to make confession, and to receive the sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have often heard families say that they did not wish to frighten their sick friend—that the sight of the minister of our Lord would inspire a terror that would hasten the final end. It is a grievous error. The priest does not terrify ; he reassures the soul, at the beginning of its long journey. He speaks in the name of the God of mercy, who comes to save, not to destroy. I could cite to you many cases of dying people who have been cured simply by contact with the sacred balm."

The good sister spoke in a tone as mournful as her look. Her heart was evidently not in the words she pronounced. Without doubt, she had learned them when she first entered the convent. Then they expressed something she really felt—she spoke her own thoughts ; but, since then, she had repeated the words over and over again to the friends of every sick person, until they lost all meaning. It was thereafter only a succession of hackneyed words, which she spoke much as she did the Latin words in her rosary. It became simply a part of her duties as nurse, like the preparation of draughts, and the making of poultices.

Noel did not listen to her ; his thoughts were far away.

" Your dear mother," continued the sister, " this good lady whom you love so much, ought to have the aid of her religion. Do you wish to endanger her soul ? If she could speak in the midst of these cruel sufferings——"

The advocate was on the point of replying, when the servant announced that a gentleman, who would not give his name, wished to speak with him on business.

" I will come," he said quickly.

" What do you decide, monsieur ? " persisted the nun.

" I leave you free, sister, to do as you may judge best."

The worthy woman began to recite her lesson of thanks, but uselessly. Noel had disappeared with a displeased look ; and almost immediately she heard his voice in the next room saying :

" Ah, Clergeot, I had almost given up seeing you ! "

The visitor who awaited the advocate was a person well known in the Rue St. Lazare, from Rue Provence to the quarters of Notre Dame de Lorette, and all along the outer boulevards, from the embankment of Martyrs to the cross-roads at Clichy.

Clergeot was no more a usurer than the father of M. Jourdain was a merchant. Only having more money than he could very well use, he lent it to his friends ; and, in return for this kindness, he consented to receive interest, which varied from twenty to thirty per cent.

The excellent man positively enjoyed the practice ; and his honesty was generally appreciated. He was never known to arrest a debtor ; he preferred to follow him without relaxation or intermission for ten years, and tear from him bit by bit what was due him.

He lived near the top of the Rue Victoire. He had no

shop ; and yet he sold everything saleable, and some other things, too, that the law scarcely considers merchandise—anything to be useful or neighbourly. He often asserted that he was not rich. It was possibly true. He was odd, very covetous, and fearfully bold. Light in purse when it suited him, he would not lend a hundred sous, even with the Ferriere's guarantee, to those who did not please him ; but he would risk his all on the smallest chance at cards.

His preferred customers consisted of young girls, actresses, artists, and those venturesome fellows who enter upon a profession worth only what they can earn, such as advocates and doctors.

He lent to women upon their present beauty, to men upon their future talent. Slight pledges ! His sagacity, it should be said, however, enjoyed a great reputation. It was rarely deceived. A girl of the town, furnished by Clergeot, had a great start in the world. For an actress to be in Clergeot's debt was a recommendation preferable to the warmest criticism.

Madame Juliette had procured this useful and honourable alliance for her lover.

Noel, who knew well how sensitive this worthy man was to kind attentions, and how pleased by politeness, began by offering him a seat, and asking after his health. Clergeot gave details. His teeth were still good ; but his sight was beginning to fail. His leg was growing soft, and his ear hard. The chapter of grievances ended, " You know," he said, " why I have come. Your notes fall due to-day ; and I am in devilish need of money. I have one of ten, one of seven, and a third of five thousand francs : total, twenty-two thousand francs."

" Ah, Clergeot," replied Noel, " not a bad joke, this ! "

" Joke ? " said the usurer ; " I am not joking at all."

" I hope you are. Why, it's just a week to-day since I wrote to tell you that I could not be ready, and asking for a renewal ! "

" I remember perfectly receiving your letter."

" What do you say to it, then ? "

" By my not answering the note, I supposed that you would understand that I could not comply with your request. I trust that you will exert yourself to find the amount for me."

Noel let a gesture of impatience escape him.

" I cannot do it," he said ; " so take your own course. I haven't a sou."

" The devil ! Do you know that I have renewed these notes four times already ? "

" I know that the interest has been fully and promptly paid, and at a rate which need not make you regret the investment."

Clergeot never liked to talk about the interest he received. He pretended that it was humiliating.

" I do not complain ; I only say that you take things too easily with me. If I had put your signature in circulation, it would be paid the moment it came due."

" Not at all."

" Yes, your pride would not bear trifling ; and you would have found means to shun a suit. But you say, ' Father Clergeot is a good fellow : he is trustworthy.' But I am so only when it can do me no harm. Now, to-day, I am in great need of funds—in—great—need," he added, emphasising each word.

The old fellow's decided tone seemed to disturb the advocate.

" Must I repeat it ? " he said ; " I am completely drained —com-plete-ly ! "

" Indeed ? " said the usurer. " Well, I am sorry for you ; but I shall have to put the papers in the sheriff's hands."

" To what end ? Let us play our cards out, M. Clergeot. You expect to increase the sheriff's revenue. Is it not so ? After you have been to all the expense, you may perhaps recover a centime. You will get judgment against me. Well, what then ? Do you think of attaching ? This is not my house ; the lease is in Madame Gerdy's name."

" I know all that. Besides, the sale of everything here would not cover the amount."

" Then you count upon dragging me to Clichy ! Bad speculation, I warn you : you will not only lose what I owe you, but much more beside."

" Good ! " cried the honest pawnbroker. " How you abuse me ! You call that being frank. Pshaw ! if you supposed me capable of half the malicious things you have said, my money would be there in your drawer, ready for me."

" A mistake ! I should not know where to get it, unless by asking Madame Gerdy—a thing I would never do."

A sarcastic and most irritating little laugh, peculiar to Père Clergeot, interrupted Noel.

" There would be simply the trouble of asking," said the usurer. " Mamma's purse has long been empty ; and if the dear creature should die now—they tell me she is very ill—I would not give two hundred louis for the inheritance."

The advocate flushed ; his eyes glittered ; but he dissembled, and protested with some spirit.

" We know what we know," continued Clergeot quietly. " Before a man risks his all, he takes pains to inquire into his chances. Mamma's last money was poured out in October last. Ah ! the Rue Provence is an expensive place ! I have made an estimate, which is at home. Juliette is a charming woman, to be sure : she has not her equal, I am convinced ; but she is expensive, devilish expensive."

Noel was enraged at hearing his Juliette thus spoken of by this honourable personage. But what reply could he make ? Besides, none of us are perfect ; and Clergeot's fault was in not properly appreciating women, which doubtless arose from the business transactions he had had with them. He was charming in his business with the fair sex, complimenting and flattering them ; but the greatest injuries would be less revolting than this impertinent familiarity.

" You have gone too fast," he continued, without deigning to notice his customer's look ; " and I have told you so before. But, pshaw ! you are wild over the girl. You cannot refuse her anything. Fool ! When a pretty girl wants anything, you should let her tease for it a long time ; it gives her something to occupy her mind, and keeps her from thinking of a crowd of other follies. Four real strong wishes, well managed, ought to last a year. You don't know how to look after your own interests. I know that her glance would strike terror into a stone saint ; and she knows her business well. Why, there ain't ten girls in Paris who live in such style ! And do you think she will love you any the more ? Not a bit of it. When she has ruined you, she'll leave you in the lurch."

Noel accepted the eloquence of his prudent banker somehow as a man without an umbrella accepts a shower.

" What is the object of all this ? " he asked.

" Simply that I will not renew your notes. You understand ? At the moment they fall due, you must hand me the twenty-two thousand francs in question. You need not

frown : you will find means to do it, to prevent my attaching your goods—not here, for that would be absurd, but at your little girl's house ; who would scarcely be pleased, and who won't hesitate to show her displeasure."

" But it is her own house ; and you have no right——"

" What of that ? She is the cause of all this trouble. I could well wait ; but she is wasting your money. Believe me, you had best parry the blow. I wish to be paid now. I won't give you any further delay ; because, for three months you have been living on your last resources. It won't do. You are in one of those conditions that must be continued at any price. You would burn the wood from your dying mother's bed to warm this creature's feet. What has become of the ten thousand francs that you left with her the other evening? Who knows what you will attempt, to procure money ? The idea of striving to ward it off fifteen days, three days, perhaps but a single day more ! Open your eyes. I know the game well. If you do not leave Juliette, you will be ruined. Listen to a little good advice, gratis. You must leave her, sooner or later, mustn't you ? Do it to-day, then."

As you see, our worthy Clergeot never minced the truth to his customers, when they were not in the right path. If they were displeased, so much the worse for them : his conscience was at rest ; it was not his affair, who never did a foolish thing in his life.

Noel could bear it no longer ; and his ill-humour burst forth.

" Enough," he cried decidedly. " Do as you please, M. Clergeot, but have done with your advice. I prefer the sheriff's plain prose. If I have committed imprudences, I can repair them, doubtless, much to your surprise. Yes, M. Clergeot, I can find the twenty-two thousand francs ; I can have a hundred thousand to-morrow morning, if I see fit. It will cost me the mere trouble of asking ; but I do not see fit. My expenses, however displeasing to you, must remain secret as heretofore. I do not wish that my embarrassment should be even suspected. I will not relinquish, for your sake, the aim that I have pursued, the very day it is in my grasp."

" He resists," thought the usurer ; " he is less deeply involved than I had imagined."

" So," continued the advocate, " take your paper to the sheriff. In a week, I shall be summoned before the court of commerce ; and I shall ask for twenty-five days' delay,

which the judges always grant to an embarrassed debtor. Twenty-five and seven, all the world over, make just thirty-two days. That is precisely the respite I need. Let us resume ; accept from me a bill of exchange for twenty-four thousand francs in six weeks, or go at once for the sheriff."

" And in six weeks," replied the usurer, " you will be in precisely the same condition you are to-day. And forty-five days more of Juliette will——"

" M. Clergeot," answered Noel, " long before that time, my position will be completely changed. But I have finished," he added, rising ; " and my time is valuable."

" One moment, you impatient fellow," interrupted the good-natured banker, " you said twenty-four thousand francs in forty-five days ? "

" Yes. That is about sixty-five per cent.—pretty fair interest."

" I never cavil about interest," said Clergeot ; " but——"

He looked sharply at Noel, rubbing his chin violently, a movement which in him indicated intense brain work.

" Only," he continued, " I should like to know upon what you are counting."

" That I cannot tell you. You will know it ere long, in common with all the world."

" I have it," cried Clergeot—" I have it ; you are going to marry. You have found an heiress ; your little Juliette told me something of that sort this morning. Ah ! you are going to marry. Is she pretty ? But what matters it ? She has a full purse, eh ? You wouldn't take her without that. Then you will keep house ? "

" I did not say so."

" That's right. Be discreet. But I can take a hint. One word more. Be careful ; your little girl has a suspicion of the truth. You are right ; it wouldn't do to be seeking money now. The slightest mis-step would be sufficient to put your father-in-law upon the track of your financial position ; and you would lose the girl. Marry, and settle down. But conceal it from Juliette ; or I would not give a hundred sous for your wedding. So it is settled. Prepare a bill of exchange for twenty-four thousand francs, and I will bring your notes to you on Monday."

" You haven't them with you, then ? "

" No. And, to be frank with you, I confess that, knowing well I should get nothing from you, I left them with others

—with the sheriff. However, you may rest easy ; you have my word."

Clergeot made an appearance of retiring ; but, just as he was going out, he turned sharply around.

" I forgot," said he ; " while you are about it, you can make the bill for twenty-six thousand francs. Your little girl ordered some dresses, which I shall deliver to-morrow : they may as well be paid in the same way."

The advocate began to remonstrate. He would certainly not refuse to pay, only he thought he ought to be consulted in the purchase. He didn't like this way of disposing of his money.

" What a fellow ! " said the usurer, shrugging his shoulders ; " do you want to make the girl unhappy ? You must keep her in good humour ; think how she might affect the marriage. And you know that, if you need any advances for the wedding, you have but to guarantee me. Speak to your notary, and everything shall be arranged. But I must go. On Monday, then ? "

Noel watched, to make sure that the usurer had actually gone. When he saw that he was not lingering on the staircase, " Fool ! " he cried, " miserable thieving old skinflint ! He is on the wrong track—the track, however, that he himself took. It would be a fine thing if this should get to the count's ears. Miserable usurer ! I almost thought that I should have to tell him all."

While inveighing thus against his banker, the advocate looked at his watch.

" Half-past five already," he said.

His indecision was great. Should he dine with his father ? Could he leave Madame Gerdy ? He longed to dine at the Commarin house ; yet, on the other hand, to leave a dying woman !

" Decidedly," he said, " I can't go."

He sat down at his desk, and with all haste wrote a letter of apology to his father. Madame Gerdy, he wrote, might breathe her last at any moment : he must remain within call.

After he had bade the servant give the note to a messenger, to carry it to the count, a sudden thought occurred to him.

" Does madame's brother," he asked, " know that she is dangerously ill ? "

" I do not know, monsieur," replied the girl ; " at any rate, it was not my fault."

" What, did you not think to inform him, in my absence ? Run to his house quickly. Have him sought for, if he is not at home ; bring him here."

More tranquil after that, he went in to sit in the sick-room. The lamp was lighted ; and the sister moved back and forth, putting everything in place, dusting and arranging. She wore an air of satisfaction that did not escape Noel.

" Have we any gleam of hope, sister ? " he asked.

" Perhaps," replied the nun. " The priest has been here, monsieur. Your dear mother did not notice his presence ; but he is coming back. That is not all. Since the priest was here, the mustard has taken admirably. The skin is quite reddened. I am sure she feels."

" God grant it, sister ! "

" Oh, I have already been praying ! But it is important not to leave her alone a minute. I have arranged all with the maid. When the doctor comes, I shall lie down, and she will watch until one in the morning. I will then rise and——"

" You may both go and rest yourselves, sister," interrupted Noel. " I shall not be able to sleep : so I will watch all night."

CHAPTER XIV

Tabaret did not consider himself defeated because he had been repulsed by the judge of inquiry, when irritated by a long day's examination. You may call it a fault or an accomplishment ; but the old man was more obstinate than a mule. To the excess of despair to which he succumbed in the gallery, there soon succeeded that firm resolution which upheld him in danger. The feeling of duty took possession of him. Was that a time to yield to discouraging idleness, when the life of a fellow-man hung on each moment ? Inaction would be unpardonable. He had plunged an innocent man into the abyss ; and he must draw him out—he alone, if no one would lend their aid. Père Tabaret, as well as the judge, gave way to weariness. On reaching the open air, he perceived that he, too, had need of rest. The emotions of the day had prevented him from feeling hungry ; and, since morning, he had taken

nothing but one glass of water. He entered a restaurant on the boulevard, and ordered supper.

While he ate, not only his courage, but his confidence came insensibly back to him. It was the same with him as with the rest of the world ; he who does not know how often the course of his ideas may change, from the beginning to the end of a repast, should be very modest. A philosopher has plainly demonstrated that heroism is but an affair of the stomach.

The old fellow looked at the situation in a much less sombre light. Was there not plenty of time before him ? What could not such a man as he do in a month ? Was his usual penetration to fail him now ? Certainly not. His great regret was, his inability to let Albert know that someone was working for him.

He was entirely another man upon leaving the table ; and it was with a cheerful step that he walked towards the Rue St. Lazare. Nine o'clock sounded as the porter opened the door for him. He jumped upstairs four steps at a time, to receive news of his old friend, of her whom he used formerly to call the excellent, the worthy Madame Gerdy.

Noel opened the door to him—Noel, who had doubtless been thinking of the past ; for he looked as sad as though the dying woman was really his mother.

In consequence of this unexpected circumstance, Père Tabaret for a few moments could not help thinking of certain difficulties which he should experience.

He knew very well that, finding himself with the advocate he would be unavoidably led to speak of the Lerouge affair ; and how could he do this, knowing, as he did, the particulars much better than his young friend himself, without exposing himself to betrayal ? But a single imprudent word would reveal the part he was playing in this sad drama. Now it was from his dear Noel, the future Viscount de Commarin, above all others, that he wished entirely to conceal his connection with the police.

But, on the other hand, he thirsted to know what had passed between the advocate and the count. The single point possessed an interest that aroused his curiosity. At last, as he could not restrain its gratification, he resolved to keep close watch upon his language and remain constantly on his guard.

The advocate took the old man into Madame Gerdy's

room. Her condition, since afternoon, had changed a little ; it was impossible to say whether for good or bad. One thing was evident, her depression was less profound. Her eyes still remained fixed ; but certain quiverings of the lids were evident. She moved on her pillow, and moaned feebly.

" What does the doctor say ? " asked Père Tabaret, in that low whisper one unconsciously takes in a sick room.

" He is just gone," replied Noel ; " before long all will be over."

The old man advanced on tiptoe, and looked at the dying woman with evident emotion.

" Poor woman ! " he murmured ; " the good God is merciful in taking her. She perhaps suffers ; but what is this pain, compared to what she would feel if she knew that her son, her true son, was in prison, accused of murder ? "

" That is what I keep repeating to myself," said Noel, " to console me for this sight ; for I always loved her, my old friend ; for me, she is still my mother. You have heard me upbraid her, have you not ? I have twice treated her very harshly. I thought I hated her ; but here, at the moment of losing her, I forget every wrong she has done me, only to remember her tenderness. Yes, much better death for her ! And yet I cannot think ; no, I cannot think her son guilty."

" What ! is it possible, you, too ? "

Père Tabaret put so much warmth and vivacity into this exclamation that Noel looked at him with a sort of wonder. He felt the colour rising in his cheeks, and he hastened to explain himself. " I said, ' you too,' " he continued, " because I, thanks perhaps to my inexperience, am persuaded of the innocence of this young man. I cannot in the least imagine a man of that rank meditating and accomplishing so cowardly a crime. I have spoken with many persons on this matter which has made so much noise ; and everybody is of my opinion. He has public opinion in his favour ; that is already something."

Seated near the bed, sufficiently far from the lamp to be in the shadow, the nun hastily knitted stockings destined for the poor. It was a purely mechanical work ; during which she usually prayed. But, since the entrance of Père Tabaret, she forgot, in listening, her everlasting prayer. What did this conversation mean ? Who could this woman be ? And this young man who was not her son, and who yet called

her mother, and at the same time spoke of a true son accused of being an assassin? Before this she had overheard mysterious remarks between Noel and the doctor. Into what singular house had she fallen ? She was a little afraid ; and her conscience was sorely troubled. Was she not sinning ? She resolved to tell all to the priest when he returned.

" No," said Noel—" no, Tabaret ; Albert has not public opinion with him. We are sharper than that in France, you must know. When a poor devil is arrested, entirely innocent, perhaps, of the crime charged against him, we usually throw stones at him. We keep all our pity for him who, without doubt the criminal, comes before the court of assize. As long as justice hesitates, we side with the prosecution against the prisoner. The moment she announces that the man is a criminal, all our sympathies are in favour of acquitting him. That's public opinion. You understand, however, that that affects me but little. I despise it to such an extent that if, as I dare still hope, Albert is not released, I will be his defender. Yes, I have told my father as much, the Count de Commarin. I will be his advocate ; I will save him."

Gladly would the old man have thrown himself on Noel's neck. He longed to say to him, " We two will save him." But he restrained himself. Would not the advocate misunderstand him, if he confessed ? He resolved, however, to reveal all if it became necessary, and if Albert's interests took a more dangerous turn. For the present, he contented himself with strongly approving his young friend.

" Bravo ! my child," said he ; " you have a noble heart. I feared to see you spoiled by wealth and rank. Pardon me ; you remain, I see, what you have always been in your humble position. But, tell me, have you, then, seen your father, the count ? "

Now, for the first time, Noel seemed to notice the eyes of the sister ; which, lighted by eager curiosity, glittered in the shadow like carbuncles. By a look, he pointed her out to the old man, and said :

" I have seen him ; and everything is arranged to my satisfaction. I will tell you all, in detail, by and by, when we are more by ourselves. By this bedside, I almost blush at my happiness."

Tabaret was obliged to content himself with this reply and this promise. Seeing that he should learn nothing this evening, he spoke of going to bed, declaring himself wearied

out, as the result of certain things he had had to do during the day. Noel did not urge his remaining. He himself was waiting, he said, for Madame Gerdy's brother, who had been sent for several times without finding him in. He would be much embarrassed, he added, in this brother's presence ; he did not yet know what conduct he ought to pursue. Should he tell him all ? But that would only increase his grief. On the other hand, silence obliged him to play a difficult part. The old man advised him to keep silent, to put off all explanation until later.

" What a fine fellow is this Noel ! " murmured Père Tabaret, on gaining his apartments as gently as possible.

He had been absent from home twenty-four hours ; and he had to go through a formidable scene with his household. Mannette was in a particularly bad humour : so she declared decidedly, and once for all, that she would get a new place, if her master did not change his conduct.

She had remained awake all night, in a terrible fright, listening to the least sound on the stairway, expecting to see her master brought home on a litter, assassinated. Then there had been great commotion in the house. M. Gerdy had gone out a short time after monsieur, and had returned two hours later. After he had come in, there had been constant inquiries for the doctor. Such goings on would be the death of her, without forgetting her temperament, which could not endure these constant worries. But Mannette forgot that the worry was not on her master's account nor on Noel's, but for a little affair of her own—one of those handsome guards of Paris having promised to marry her, but for whom she had waited in vain—the rascal !

She burst forth in reproaches, while she was laying the table for her master, too frank, she declared, to keep anything on her mind, and keep her mouth closed, when she felt so much interest in monsieur, in his health and reputation. Monsieur made no reply, not being in the mood for argument. He bent his head to the squall, turning his back to the storm. But, when Mannette had finished her preparations, he shoved her out of the room without ceremony, and double locked the door.

He busied himself in forming a new line of battle, and in deciding upon prompt and active measures. Rapidly he analysed the situation. Had he been deceived in his investigations ? No. Had his calculations of probabilities been

erroneous? No. He had started with a positive fact, the murder. He had discovered the particulars; his inferences were correct, and must inevitably point at a criminal such as he had indicated: and this criminal could not be M. Daburon's prisoner. His confidence in a judicial axiom had led him astray, when he pointed out Albert.

"See," thought he, "where their standard opinions and absurd axioms, all cut and dried, lead us, when they are foolishly followed, like the landmarks on a road! Left free to my own inspirations, I formed this case very profoundly. I did not trust to chance. The formula, 'Seek out the one whom the crime benefits' may be as often absurd as true. The heirs of a man assassinated are in reality all benefited by a murder; while the assassin receives at most the watch or purse of the victim. Three persons were interested in the death of the Widow Lerouge—Albert, Madame Gerdy, and the Count de Commarin. It is plain to see that Albert is not the criminal. It is not Madame Gerdy, who has been killed by the unexpected announcement of the crime. There remains, then, the count. Can it be he? He certainly did not do it himself. He hired some wretch—a wretch of good position, if you please, wearing well-varnished boots of a good make, and smoking Trabucos with an amber mouth-piece. These villains of good position ordinarily lack nerve. They cheat, they forge; but they don't assassinate. But here the count would simply exchange a rabbit for a hare. He would merely substitute one accomplice for another still more dangerous. That would be idiotic; and the count is an intelligent man. He is, therefore, out of the question. I shall have to start off on another tack.

"Another thing, the Widow Lerouge, who so dexterously exchanged the children while nursing them, would be very likely to undertake a number of dangerous commissions. Who can prove that she has not made it, before now, the interest of someone else to get her out of the way? There is a mystery here. I am impatient; but I have not yet unravelled it. One thing is sure, though, she was not assassinated to prevent Noel from recovering his rights. She must have been suppressed for some analogous reason, by a bold, experienced scoundrel, who wore the clothing I fixed upon Albert. It is, then, this scent I must follow. And, above all, I must have the past history of this obliging

widow, and I will have it, too ; for the investigations ordered at her birthplace will be in court to-morrow."

Returning now to Albert, Père Tabaret weighed the charges which were brought against the young man, and reckoned the chances which he still had.

" From the look of things," he murmured, " I see only luck and myself ; that is to say, absolutely nothing in his favour at present. As to the charges, they aren't worth anything. However, it is no use going over them. It is I who amassed them ; and I know what they are worth ! At once everything and nothing. What do signs prove, however striking they may be, in this case, where one ought to disbelieve even the witness of his own senses ? Albert is a victim of the most remarkable coincidences : but one word might explain them. I have seen many just such cases. It was even worse in the affair of my little tailor. At five o'clock, he bought a knife, which he showed to ten of his friends, saying, this is for my wife, who is an idle jade, and who plays me false with my servants. In the evening, the neighbour heard a terrible quarrel between the couple—cries, threats, stamping, blows ; then suddenly all was quiet. The next day, the tailor had disappeared from his house ; and they discovered the woman dead, with the very same knife buried to the hilt between her shoulders. Ah, well ! it turned out it was not the husband who had planted it there ; it was a jealous lover. After that, what is to be believed? Albert, it is true, will not give an account of how he passed the evening. That does not affect me. The question for me is not prove where he was, but that he was not at Jonchère. Perhaps, after all, Gevrol was on the right track. I hope so, from the bottom of my heart. Yes ; God grant that he may be successful. My vanity and my mad presumption will deserve the slight punishment of his triumph over me. What would I not give to establish this man's innocence ? Half of my fortune would be but a small sacrifice. If I should be foiled ; if, after having caused the evil, I should find myself powerless to undo it ! "

Père Tabaret went to bed, shuddering at this last thought. He fell asleep, and had a terrible nightmare.

Lost in that vulgar crowd which, on the days when society revenges itself, presses about the Place de la Roquette and watches the last convulsions of one condemned to death, he attended Albert's execution. He saw the unhappy boy,

his hands bound behind his back, his collar turned down, ascend, supported by a priest, the steep flight of stairs leading to the scaffold. He saw him upright upon the fatal platform, throwing his pious gaze upon the dismayed assembly. Soon the eyes of the condemned man met his own ; and, breaking his cords, he pointed him, Tabaret, out in the crowd, saying in a loud voice, " There is my murderer." Then a great clamour arose to curse him. He wished to escape ; but his feet were nailed to the ground. He tried to close his eyes ; he could not. A force unknown and irresistible compelled him to look. Then Albert again cried out, " I am innocent ; the guilty one is——" He pronounced some name ; the crowd repeated the name ; and he alone did not understand it. Finally the head of the condemned man fell.

The old man gave a loud cry, and awoke in a cold sweat. It took him some time to convince himself that nothing was real of this which he had felt and seen and that he was actually in his own house, in his own bed : it was only a dream ! But dreams sometimes are, they say, warnings from heaven. His imagination was in that excited condition that he made unheard-of efforts to recall the name of the criminal pronounced by Albert. Not succeeding, he got up and lighted his candle. The darkness made him afraid. The night peoples itself with phantoms. It was no longer with him a question of sleep. Beset with these anxieties, he accused himself most severely, and harshly reproached the occupation he had until now so delighted in. Poor soul !

He was mad to fix the day when it first came into his head to seek employment in the Rue Benjamin Frère—noble hobby, truly, for a man of his age, a good quiet citizen of Paris, rich and esteemed by all ! And to think that he had been proud of his exploits, that he had boasted of his cunning, that he had plumed himself on his keenness of scent, that he had been flattered by that ridiculous soubriquet " Tirauclair." Old fool ! What had he gained from the business of bloodhound ? All sorts of annoyance, the contempt of the world, without counting the danger of contributing to the conviction of an innocent man. Why had he not taken warning from the case of the little tailor ?

Recalling the few satisfactions of the past, and comparing them with the present anguish, he resolved that he would have no more to do with it. Albert once saved, he would

seek some amusement less dangerous, and more generally appreciated. He would break the connection of which he was ashamed, and the police and justice might go on without him.

At last the day, which he had awaited with feverish impatience, dawned. To pass the time, he dressed himself slowly, with much care, trying to occupy his mind with little details, until an hour had passed ; during which he had looked twenty times at the clock, to see if it had not stopped. In spite of all this delay, it was not eight o'clock when he caused himself to be announced at the judge's door, praying him to excuse, on account of the importance of his business, a visit too early not to be unwelcome.

Excuses were superfluous. They did not disturb M. Daburon at eight in the morning. Already he was at work. He received, with his usual kindness, the old amateur detective, and even joked with him a little on his absurdity of the night before. Who would have thought his nerves so sensitive ? Doubtless the night had brought deliberation. Had he recovered his old good sense ? or had he put his hand on the true criminal ?

This trifling tone in a magistrate, who was accused of being grave even to a fault, troubled the old man. Did not this quizzing hide a determination to neglect all that he could say ? He believed it did ; and it was without the least deception that he commenced his pleading.

He put the case more calmly this time, but with all the energy of a well-digested conviction. He addressed himself to the heart, he spoke to the reason ; but, although doubt is essentially contagious, he neither succeeded in convincing the judge nor shaking his opinion. His strongest arguments were of no more avail against Daburon's absolute conviction than bullets of crumbs of bread against a breastplate. And, at this failure, he was in no way surprised.

Père Tabaret had on his side only a subtle theory, words ; Daburon possessed palpable testimony, facts. And such was this cause, that all the reasons brought forward by the old man to justify Albert simply reacted upon him, and confirmed his guilt.

A repulse at the judge's hands had entered too much into Tabaret's calculations for him to appear troubled or discouraged. He declared that, for the present, he would insist no more : he had full confidence in the wisdom and

impartiality of Daburon. It sufficed him to have put him on his guard against the influences which he himself had unfortunately used in working up the case.

He was going, he added, to busy himself with hunting up " new signs." They were only at the beginning of the inquiry ; and they were yet ignorant of very many things, even of the past life of the Widow Lerouge. New facts may come to light. Who knows what testimony the man with the rings in his ears, who was now being pursued by Gevrol, may give. All enraged within, and longing to injure in some way the " idiot magistrate," as he called the judge, Père Tabaret forced himself to be humble and polite. He wished, he said, to keep track of the examination, and to be informed of the result of future investigations. He finally ended by asking permission to communicate with Albert. He thought his services deserved this slight favour. He wished an interview of only ten minutes without witnesses.

Daburon refused this request. He declared that, for the present, the prisoner must continue to remain strictly in solitary confinement.

As a sort of consolation, he added that, in three or four days, he might perhaps be able to change this decision, provided the motives which caused it no longer existed.

" Your refusal is cruel, monsieur," said Père Tabaret ; " but I understand it, and obey."

That was his only complaint ; and he withdrew almost immediately, fearing that he could no longer master his irritation.

He felt that, besides the great happiness of saving an innocent man, compromised by his imprudence, he should experience an unspeakable delight in avenging himself upon the stubbornness of the judge.

" Three or four days," he muttered, " that is to say, three or four years for the unfortunate prisoner. He speaks quite at his ease, this kind magistrate. But Albert ought to know the truth now."

Yes, Daburon only asked three or four days to wring a confession from Albert, or at least to make him change his system of defence.

The difficulty of the prosecution was in not being able to produce any witness who had seen the prisoner on the evening of Shrove Tuesday.

One deposition alone to that effect would have so great

weight that Daburon, upon Tabaret's departure, turned all his efforts in that direction.

He had great hope yet. It was now only Saturday. The day of the murder was remarkable enough to fix people's memories ; and there had not been time yet to set on foot a proper investigation.

Five of the most experienced spies in the secret service were sent to Bougival, supplied with photographs of Albert. They were to scour the entire country between Reuil and Jonchère, to hunt, inquire into, and examine—to obtain the most precise and the most minute information. The photographs would greatly aid their efforts. They had orders to show them everywhere and to everybody, and even to leave a dozen in the place, being furnished with a sufficient number to do so. It was impossible that, on an evening when so many people were about, no one had observed the original of the picture either at the station at Reuil or upon one of the roads which led to Jonchère—the highway, or the road by the water's edge.

These arrangements made, Daburon proceeded to the Palais de Justice, and sent for his prisoner.

He had already in the morning received a report, informing him hour by hour of the deeds, gestures, and utterances of the prisoner, carefully watched. Nothing in him, the report said, declared the criminal. He appeared sad, but not despairing. He had not cried out, nor threatened, nor cursed at justice, nor even spoke of the fatal deed. After having eaten lightly, he went to the window of his cell and had there remained standing for more than an hour. Then he laid down, and had quietly gone to sleep.

" What an iron constitution ! " thought Daburon, when the prisoner entered his office.

Albert was no longer the despairing man, who the night before, dizzy with the multiplicity of charges, overcome by the rapidity of the blows, had writhed beneath the gaze of the magistrate, and appeared ready to faint. Innocent or guilty, his course had been taken ; his face left no doubt of that. His eyes expressed that resolution, careless of a sacrifice freely made, and a certain haughtiness which might be taken for disdain, but which expressed the noble feeling of an injured man. In him was seen a man utterly self-reliant, who might be shaken, but never overcome by misfortune.

At this countenance, the judge knew that he must change

his mode of attack. He recognised one of those natures which, attacked, was only provoked to resistance, and, threatened, was only rendered obstinate. Renouncing his efforts to frighten, he attempted to soften him. It was a hackneyed trick, but one always successful, like certain pathetic scenes at theatres. The criminal who has girt up his energy to sustain the shock of intimidation, finds himself without defence against the wheedling of kindness, the greater in proportion to its lack of sincerity. Now tenderness would cause Daburon's triumph. What an avowal he knew would burst forth in tears ! No one knew so well as he how to touch the cords which vibrate still even in the most abandoned heart—honour, love, family.

To Albert, he became kind and friendly, full of the liveliest compassion. Unfortunate man ! how much he had had to suffer—he whose whole life had been like one long enchantment. How everything had fallen about him in ruins, at a single blow ! Who could have foreseen all this in the time when he was the one hope of a wealthy and illustrious house ! Calling up the past, the judge pictured to him the most touching reminiscences of his early youth, and stirred up the ashes of all his extinct affections. Using and abusing all that he knew of the life of the prisoner, he martyred himself by the most mournful allusions to Claire. How could he persist in bearing alone his great misfortune ? Had he no one in the world who would deem it happiness to share his sufferings ? Why this morose silence ? Should he not rather hasten to rescue her whose very life depended upon his ? What was necessary to that end ? But a single word. Then he would be, if not free, at least returned to the world. His prison would become an habitable abode, no longer solitary ; his friends would visit him : he might receive whomever he saw fit.

It was no longer a judge who spoke ; it was a father, who still keeps in his heart indulgence for his son.

Daburon went on. He would for a moment imagine himself in Albert's position. What would be his condition after the terrible discovery. He would scarcely dare question himself. He would dwell upon the murder of the Widow Lerouge ; he would explain it to himself ; he would almost excuse it. (Another trap.) It was certainly an enormous crime, but not one revolting to conscience or to reason. It was one of those crimes which society might, if not forget,

at least forgive up to a certain point, because the motive was not a disgraceful one. What tribunal would fail to find extenuating circumstances for a moment of frenzy so excusable ? For was not the first the greatest criminal, the Count de Commarin ? Was it not his folly that prepared the way for this terrible dénouement ? His son had been the victim of a fatality, and was in the highest degree to be pitied.

Upon this text Daburon spoke for a long time, seeking those things most suitable in his opinion to soften the hardened heart of the assassin. And he arrived always at the same conclusion—the wisdom of confessing. But he wasted his eloquence precisely as Tabaret had wasted his. Albert appeared in no way affected. His replies were of the shortest. He began and ended as at first, in protesting his innocence.

One test, which had often given the desired result, now remained to be tried.

On this same day, Saturday, Albert was confronted with the corpse of the Widow Lerouge. He appeared impressed by the sad sight, but no more than anyone would be, if forced to look at the victim of an assassination four days after the crime. One of the bystanders exclaiming :

" Ah, if she could but speak ! " he replied, " That would be great good fortune for me."

Since morning, Daburon had not obtained the least advantage. He had to acknowledge the failure of his plot ; and here this last triumph had grounded. The unmoved calmness of the prisoner filled to overflowing the exasperation of this man so sure of his facts. His spite was evident to all when, dropping suddenly his wheedling, he harshly gave the orders to re-conduct the prisoner to his cell.

" I will compel him to confess," he ground between his teeth.

Perhaps he regretted those gentle instruments of investigation of the Middle Ages, which compelled the prisoner to say whatever they wanted him to. Never, thought he, did anyone ever meet a prisoner like this. What could he reasonably hope for from this system of persistent denial ? This obstinacy, absurd in the presence of absolute proofs, drove the judge into a rage. Albert, confessing his guilt, would have found him disposed to pity ; denying it, he opposed himself to an implacable enemy.

It was the very falseness of the situation which misled and blinded this magistrate, naturally so kind and generous.

Having previously wished Albert innocent, he now absolutely longed to prove him guilty, and that for a hundred reasons which he was unable to analyse. He remembered, too, his having had the Viscount de Commarin for a rival, and his having nearly murdered him. Had he not repented even with remorse his having signed the warrant of arrest, and accepted the duty of investigation? Tabaret's incomprehensible change troubled him, too.

All these feelings, combined, inspired Daburon with a feverish hatred, urging him on in the path which he had chosen. In future, it would be less the proofs of Albert's guilt which he sought for than the justification of his own conduct to himself as judge. The investigation rankled, as if it were a personal matter.

In fact, were the prisoner innocent, he would become inexcusable in his own eyes; and, in proportion as he reproached himself the more severely, and as the feelings of his own wrongs grew, he was the more disposed to try everything to conquer this ancient rival, even to abusing his own power. The logic of events urged him on. It seemed as though his honour itself were at stake; and he displayed a passionate activity, such as had never been seen before in any investigation.

All Sunday Daburon passed in listening to the reports of his agents at Bougival.

They had spared no trouble, they stated; but they could report no new developments.

They had heard many speak of a woman who had pretended, they said, to have seen the assassin leaving the Widow Lerouge's house; but no one had been able to point this woman out to them, or even to give them her name.

But they all thought it their duty to inform the judge that another inquiry was going on at the same time with theirs. It was under the charge of Père Tabaret, who personally scoured the country in all directions in a cabriolet drawn by a very swift horse. He must have acted with great promptness; for everywhere that they presented themselves he had anticipated them. He appeared to have under his orders a dozen men, four of whom at least certainly belonged to the Rue Jerusalem. All the detectives had met him; and he had spoken to all of them. To one he had said:

"What the devil are you showing this photograph for? In less than no time you will pick up a witness who, to gain

three francs, will describe someone more like the picture than the picture itself."

He had met another agent on the road, and had laughed at him.

"You are a simple fellow," he cried out to him, "to hunt for a hiding man in the highway ; look a little aside and you may find him."

Finally he had accosted two who were together in a café at Bougival, and had taken them aside.

"I have him," he said to them. "He is a smart fellow ; he passed by Chatois. Three people have seen him—two railway employés, and a third person whose testimony will be decisive, for she spoke to him. He was smoking."

Daburon was so angry at this with Père Tabaret that, on the instant he started for Bougival, firmly resolved to bring this too zealous man back to Paris and to give him some occupation more in the interests of justice. This trip was useless. Tabaret, cabriolet, swift horse, and the twelve men had all disappeared, or, at least, were not to be found.

On returning home, much fatigued and very angry, the judge of inquiry found the following despatch from the chief of the detective force ; it was brief, and to the point :

ROUEN, *Sunday*.

The man is found. This evening we start for Paris. The most valuable testimony.

GEVROL.

CHAPTER XV

Monday morning, at nine o'clock, Daburon was preparing to start for the Palais de Justice, where he expected to find Gevrol and his man, and perhaps Père Tabaret.

His preparations were nearly made, when his servant announced that a young lady, accompanied by another more elderly, asked to speak with him.

She declined giving her name, saying, however, that she would not refuse it if that was absolutely necessary in order to be received.

"Let her enter," said the judge.

He thought it might be a relation of someone of the prisoners with whose business he had been employed before the Jonchère crime occurred. He determined to make short work of her, if she were troublesome.

He was standing before his mantel, hunting for an address in a plate filled with visiting-cards. At the sound of the opening of the door, at the rustling of a silk dress gliding by the window, he did not take the trouble to move, did not deign even to turn his head. He contented himself with merely casting a careless glance into the mirror.

But he immediately started with a movement of dismay, as if he had seen a ghost. In his confusion, he dropped the card-plate, which fell noisily to the hearth, and broke into a thousand pieces.

" Claire," he stammered, " Claire ! "

And, as if he feared equally either his being deceived by an illusion or the actually seeing her whose name he pronounced, he turned slowly.

This young girl, usually so proud and reserved, had had courage to come to his house alone, or almost alone ; for her governess, whom she had left in the antechamber, counted as no one. She was obeying some powerful emotion ; since it made her forget her habitual timidity.

Never, even in the time when a sight of her was his greatest happiness, had she appeared more fascinating. Her beauty, ordinarily veiled by a sweet sadness, beamed forth, and dazzled him. Her features had an animation which he had never seen in them before. In her eyes, rendered more brilliant by recent tears, even now hardly wiped away, shone the noblest resolution. One could see that she was conscious of having a great duty to perform, and that she would accomplish it, if not with pleasure, at least with the simplicity which in her was heroism.

She advanced calm and dignified, and held out her hand to the magistrate in that English style that some ladies can imitate so gracefully.

" We have always been friends have we not ? " she said, with a sad smile.

The magistrate did not dare take the ungloved hand she held out to him. It was as much as he dared to touch the end of her fingers, as if he feared too great an emotion.

" Yes," he replied indistinctly, " I have been always devoted to you."

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges sat down in the easy chair where, two nights previously, Père Tabaret had planned Albert's arrest.

" Do you know why I have come ? " asked the young girl.

With a nod, he replied in the affirmative.

He divined her object only too easily ; and he was asking himself, in fact, whether he ought to resist prayers from such a mouth. What could she ask that he would have the heart to refuse ? Ah, if he had forseen this !

" I only knew of this dreadful story yesterday," pursued Claire ; " they considered it wise to hide it from me ; and, but for my devoted Schmidt, I should still be ignorant of it all. What a night I have passed ! I was at first terrified ; but, when they told me that all depended upon you, my fears were dispelled. It is for my sake, is it not, that you have taken charge of this trial ? Oh, you are a noble man ! How can I ever express my thanks ! "

What humiliation for the honest magistrate were these heartfelt thanks ! Yes, he had at first thought of Mademoiselle d'Arlanges ; but since—— He bowed his head, to avoid that beautiful sight of Claire, so pure, so daring.

" Do not thank me, mademoiselle," he stammered. " I have not the claim that you think upon your gratitude."

Claire had already noticed the magistrate's agitation. The trembling of his voice attracted her attention ; but she did not suspect the cause. She thought that her presence recalled sad memories, that he doubtless still loved her, and that he was suffering for her. This idea saddened her, and filled her with self-reproach.

" And yet, monsieur," she continued, " I thank you all the same. I should never have dared go to another judge, to speak to an entire stranger ! For what value would he attach to my words, not knowing me ? While you, you, so generous, will reassure me, will tell me by what unhappy mistake he has been arrested and put in prison."

" Alas ! " sighed the magistrate, so low that Claire scarcely heard or understood the terrible meaning of the exclamation.

" With you," she continued, " I do not fear. You are my friend, you have told me ; you will not refuse my prayers. Give him his liberty quickly. I do not know exactly of what he is accused ; but I swear to you that he is innocent."

Claire spoke in the positive manner of one who saw no obstacle in the way to the very simple and natural desire which she had expressed. A formal assurance given by her ought to be amply sufficient ; in a word, Daburon was to repair everything. The judge was silent. He admired this

saint-like ignorance of everything, this artless and frank confidence which doubted nothing. She had commenced by wounding him inadvertently, it is true ; but he quite forgot that.

He was really honest, good as the best, as is proved from the fact that, at the moment of unveiling the fatal truth, he shuddered. He hesitated to pronounce the words whose breath, like a whirlwind, would overturn the fragile edifice of this young girl's happiness. Humiliated, despised, he was going to have his revenge ; but it brought him no satisfaction.

" And if I should tell you, mademoiselle," he commenced, " that Albert is not innocent——"

She half-raised herself with a protesting gesture. He continued :

" If I should tell you he is guilty ? "

" Oh, monsieur," interrupted Claire, " you cannot think it ! "

" I do think it, mademoiselle," continued the magistrate in a sad voice ; " and I must add that I am morally certain of it."

Claire looked at the magistrate with profound amazement. Could this really be Daburon who was speaking to her ? Did she hear him aright ? Did she understand ? She was really in doubt. Had he answered seriously ? Was he not abusing her by an unworthy, cruel jest ? She asked herself this with a sort of wildness ; for everything appeared possible, probable, rather than that which he had spoken.

Not daring to raise his eyes, he continued in a tone expressive of the sincerest pity :

" I suffer cruelly for you at this moment, mademoiselle ; but I have the courage to tell you the truth, and you must summon yours to hear it. Much better that you should know all from the mouth of a friend. Summon, then, all your fortitude ; strengthen your soul against a most dreadful misfortune. No, there is no mistake. The law has not been deceived. The Viscount de Commarin is accused of murder ; and it is absolutely—absolutely, understand me —proved that he committed it."

Like a doctor, who pours out drop by drop a dangerous medicine, Daburon pronounced slowly, word by word, this last sentence. He watched carefully the result, ready to cease if the shock was too great. He did not suppose that

this young girl, timid to excess, with a sensitiveness almost a disease, would be able to hear without flinching such a revelation. He expected a burst of despair, tears, distressing cries. She might perhaps faint away ; and he stood ready to call in the good Schmidt.

He was deceived. Claire drew herself up, full of energy and valour. The flame of indignation flushed her cheeks, and dried her tears.

" It is false," she cried ; " and those who say it are liars. He cannot be ; no, he cannot be a murderer. If he were here, and should himself say, ' It is true,' I should refuse to believe it : I should still cry out, ' It is false.' "

" He has not yet confessed it," continued the judge ; " but he will confess it ; and, if not, there are more proofs than are needed to convict him. The charges against him are as impossible to deny as is the sun which shines upon us."

" Ah ! well," interrupted Mademoiselle d'Arlanges, in a voice which thrilled his soul, " I assert that the law is deceived. Yes," she persisted, stopping a gesture of denial from the judge—" yes, he is innocent. I am sure of it ; and I will proclaim it, even if the whole world joined with you in accusing him. Do you not see that I understand him better than he can understand himself? That my faith in him is absolute, as that which I have in God ? That I would doubt myself before doubting him ? "

The judge of inquiry attempted timidly to make an objection. Claire interrupted him :

" You force me, then, monsieur," said she, " in order to overcome you, to forget that I am a young girl, and that I am not talking to my mother, but to a man. For his sake, I can bear it ! It is four years, monsieur, since we first loved, and told each other of it. Since that time, I have not kept from him one of my thoughts : he has not hid from me one of his. For four years, we have never had a secret between us : he lived in me, as I lived in him. I alone can say how worthy he is to be loved ; I alone know all that grandeur of soul, nobility of thought, generosity of sentiment, from which you have so easily made a murderer. And I have seen him, oh ! so unhappy, while all the world envied his lot. He was like me, alone in the world ; his father never loved him. Sustained one by the other, we have passed many a sad day ; and it is at the very moment our trial was ending that he has become a criminal. Why ? Tell me why ? "

" Neither the name nor fortune of the Count de Commarin would descend to him, mademoiselle ; and the knowledge of it came upon him with a sudden shock. One old woman alone was able to prove this. To protect his position, he killed her."

" What madness," cried the young girl. " What shameful, wicked calumny ! I know, monsieur, this story of falling greatness ; he himself told me of it. It is true that for three days this misfortune unmanned him ; but, if he was dismayed, it was on my account more than his own. He was distressed at thinking that perhaps I should be grieved, when he confessed to me that he could no longer give me all that his love dreamed of. I grieved ? Ah ! what is this great name, this immense wealth to me ? I owe to them all the unhappiness of my life. Was it, then, for their sake that I loved him ? It was thus that I replied to him ; and he, so sad, immediately recovered his gaiety. He thanked me, saying, ' You love me ; the rest is of no consequence.' I chided him, then, for having doubted me ; and, after that, would he thus cowardly assassinate an old woman ? You dare not repeat it."

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges ceased, a smile of victory on her lips. That smile meant, " At last I have attained my end : you are conquered ; what can you reply to all that I have said ? "

The magistrate did not long leave this smiling illusion to the unhappy child. He did not perceive the cruelty, the shock of his persistence. Always the one idea. In persuading Claire, he would justify his own conduct to himself.

" You do not know, mademoiselle," he continued, " what giddiness may overthrow the reason of an honest man. It is only at the time a thing escapes us that we feel the greatness of the loss. God keep me from doubting all that which you have said ! But picture to yourself the immensity of the blow which has fallen upon M. de Commarin. Think of the despair to which he was driven on leaving you, and the extremities to which it might lead him ! He might have had a moment of wildness, and have done the deed without perceiving its enormity. In this way the crime may be explained."

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges' face grew deathly pale, and betrayed the utmost terror. The judge saw that at last doubt began to affect her noble and pure thoughts.

" He might, then, have been mad," she murmured.

" Possibly," replied the judge ; " but the circumstances of the crime denote a well-laid plan. Believe me, then, mademoiselle, and do not be too confident. Await the issue of this unhappy trial. Listen to my voice ; it is that of a friend. You used to have in me the confidence a daughter gives to her father, you have often told me ; do not refuse my advice then. Keep silence ; wait. Hide your real grief ; you may hereafter regret having shown it. Young and inexperienced, you have sadly misplaced your affections."

" No, monsieur, no," stammered Claire. " Ah ! " she added, " you speak like the rest of the world—the prudent, egotistical world, which I despise and hate."

" Poor child ! " continued Daburon, pitiless even in his compassion, " unhappy girl ! this is your first deception ! Nothing can be imagined more terrible. Few women would know how to bear it. But you are young ; you are brave ; your life will not be ruined. Hereafter you will feel horrified at this crime. There is no wound, I know by experience, which time does not heal."

Claire tried to grasp what the judge was saying ; but she heard only confused sounds ; the meaning entirely escaped her.

" I do not understand, monsieur," she broke in. " What advice, then, would you give me ? "

" The only one that reason dictates, and that my affection for you can suggest, mademoiselle. I speak to you like a tender and devoted brother. I say to you, ' Courage, Claire : give yourself up to the saddest, greatest sacrifice which honour can ask of a young girl. Weep, yes, weep for your deceived love ; but renounce it. Pray heaven to send you forgetfulness. He whom you have loved is no longer worthy of you.' "

The judge stopped, a little frightened. Mademoiselle d'Arlanges had become livid.

But, although the body failed, the soul still remained firm.

" You said a moment since," she murmured, " that he might have committed this crime in a moment of distraction, in a fit of madness ? "

" Yes, it is possible."

" Then, monsieur, not knowing what he did, he is no criminal."

The judge of inquiry forgot a certain troublesome question

which he had put to himself one morning in bed after his sickness.

" Neither justice nor society, mademoiselle," he replied, " can take that into account. To God alone, who sees into the depths of our hearts, it belongs to judge, to decide upon these questions which human justice must pass by. In our sight, M. de Commarin is a criminal. There may be certain extenuating circumstances to soften the punishment ; but the moral stain is the same. Even if he were acquitted—and I hope he may be, but without hope—he will always wear the dishonour, the stain of blood cowardly shed. Then give him up."

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges stopped the judge with a look which flashed the most vivid resentment.

" Then," she cried, " you counsel me to abandon him in his misfortune. All the world deserts him ; and your prudence advises me to act with the world. Men may act thus, they tell me, when one of their friends is ruined ; but women never. Look about you ; however humiliated, however wretched, however fallen, you always find the wife near, to sustain and console. When the last friend has taken to flight, when the last relation has abandoned you, the wife remains."

The judge regretted his having been carried away a little too far. Claire's excitement frightened him. He tried in vain to stop her.

" I may be timid," she continued with increasing energy ; " but I am no coward. I have chosen Albert voluntarily from all. Whatever happens to him, I will never desert him. No : I will never say, ' I do not know this man.' He would have given me half of his prosperity, and of his glory. I will share, whether he expects it or not, half of his shame and misfortune. Between two, the burden will be less weighty. Strike ! I will cling so closely to him that no blow can touch him without hurting me, too. You counsel me to forget him. Teach me, then, how. I forget him ? Could I, if I wished ? But I do not wish it. I love him. It is no more in my power to cease loving him than it is to arrest, by the sole effort of my will, the beating of my heart. He is a prisoner, accused of an assassination. So be it. I love him. He is a criminal. What of that ? I love him. You condemn, you dishonour him. Condemned, dishonoured, I still love him. You will send him to prison. I will follow him ; and in the prison, under the convict's dress, I will love him still.

Let him fall to the bottom of the abyss. I will fall with him. My life is his, at his disposal. No, nothing shall separate us, nothing but death ! And, if he must mount the scaffold, I shall die, I know well, with the blow which fells him."

Daburon had buried his face in his hands. He would not for worlds have Claire perceive the emotion with which he was affected.

" How she loves him ! " he thought, " how she loves him ! "

His spirit was sunk in the darkest thoughts. All the stings of jealousy were rending him.

What would his delight not be if he were the object of so irresistible a passion as this which shone before him ! What would he not give in return ! He had, too, a young and ardent soul, a burning thirst for love. But who would be thus troubled for him ? He was esteemed, respected, perhaps feared, but not loved ; and he never would be. Was he, then, unworthy of it ? Why do so many men pass through life destitute of love, while others, the vilest beings sometimes, seem to possess a mysterious power which charms, seduces, carries away, which inspires in the object of their affection a blind, impetuous longing to sacrifice herself for them. Have women, then, no reason nor discernment ?

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges' silence brought the judge back to himself. He raised his eyes to her. Overcome by the violence of her enthusiasm, she fell back in her chair, and breathed with such difficulty that Daburon feared that she was going to faint. He moved his hand quickly to the bell upon his desk, to summon aid ; but Claire was quicker still, and stopped him.

" What are you going to do ? " she asked.

" You seemed suffering so much," he stammered, " that I——"

" It is nothing, monsieur," replied she. " I may seem weak ; but it is nothing. I am very strong, believe me, very strong. It is true that I suffer, as I never believed that one could suffer. It is cruel for a young girl to have to do violence to all her feelings. You ought to be satisfied, monsieur. I have torn aside all veils ; and you have read even the inmost recesses of my heart. But I do not regret it ; it was for his sake. That which I do regret is my having lowered myself so far as to defend him ; but he will forgive me that one doubt. Your persistence startled me so. A man like

him does not need defence ; his innocence must be proved ; and, God helping me, I will prove it."

As Claire was half-rising to depart, Daburon detained her by a gesture. In his blindness, he thought he would be doing wrong to leave this poor young girl deceived in the slightest way. Having done so much at the beginning, he persuaded himself that his duty bade him go on to the end. He said to himself, in all good faith, that so he should save Claire herself, and spare her in the future from bitter regrets. The surgeon who has commenced a painful operation does not leave it half-finished because the patient struggles, suffers, and cries out.

" It is painful, mademoiselle——" he began.

Claire would not let him finish.

" Enough, monsieur," said she ; " all that you can say will be of no avail. I respect your unhappy conviction. I ask, in return, the same regard for mine. If you were truly my friend, I should ask you to aid me in the task of saving him, to which I shall devote myself ; but you, doubtless, are not willing."

Claire seemed to be continually irritating the unhappy magistrate. With her woman's instinct, she had arrived at the same result as Père Tabaret with his logic. Women neither analyse nor reason : they feel and think. Instead of discussing, they affirm ; and here, perhaps, arises their superiority. As for Claire, Daburon did not feel that she was his enemy ; and yet she treated him like one.

Daburon resented strongly this injury. Annoyed by his scruples of conscience on one side, and by his convictions on the other, tossed about between duty and feelings, embarrassed by the harness of his profession, he was incapable of simple reflection. For three days he had acted like a stubborn child. Why this obstinacy, which would not admit the possibility of Albert's innocence ? Investigations in all cases have the same aim. But he, usually favourable to a prisoner, would not admit for a moment that there might be a mistake in this case.

" If you knew the proofs which I have in my hand, mademoiselle," he said in a cold tone, which expressed his determination not to give way to anger, " if I should show them to you, you would have no longer a doubt."

" Speak, monsieur," cried Claire imperiously.

" You wish it, mademoiselle ? Very well ; I will give you in detail all the charges made by justice. I will explain

everything ; you shall know all. But no ; why should I harass you with all the proofs ? There is one which alone is decisive. The murder was committed on the evening of Shrove Tuesday ; and the prisoner cannot give an account of what he did on that evening. He went out, however, and returned home about two o'clock in the morning, his clothes soiled and torn, his gloves frayed."

" Oh, enough, monsieur, enough ! " broke in Claire, whose eyes beamed once more with happiness. " You say it was on Shrove Tuesday evening ? "

" Yes, mademoiselle."

" Ah ! I was sure," she cried triumphantly. " I told you truly that he could not be the criminal."

She raised her hands ; and, from the movement of her lips, it was evident that she was praying.

The expression of the most perfect trust, represented by some of the Italian painters, illuminated her beautiful face, while she gave thanks to God in a burst of thankfulness.

The magistrate was so disconcerted that he forgot to admire her. He awaited an explanation.

" Well ? " he asked impatiently.

" Monsieur," replied Claire, " if that is your strongest proof, it exists no longer. Albert passed the entire evening you speak of with me."

" With you ? " stammered the judge.

" Yes, with me, at my house."

Daburon was stunned. Was he dreaming ? His arms fell.

" What ! " he exclaimed, " the viscount was at your house ? And your grandmother, your governess, your servants, did they all see him and speak to him ? "

" No, monsieur ; he came and went away in secret. He wished no one to see him ; he desired to be alone with me."

" Ah ! " said the judge, with a sigh of relief.

The sigh was significant. It meant, " It's all clear—only too evident. She is determined to save him, at the risk even of compromising her reputation. Poor girl ! The idea must have just occurred to her."

This " Ah ! " was interpreted very differently by Mademoiselle d'Arlanges. She thought that Daburon was astonished at her consenting to receive Albert.

" Your surprise is an insult, monsieur," said she.

" Mademoiselle ! "

" A daughter of my family, monsieur, may receive her

fiancé, without danger of anything occurring for which she should blush."

She said this, and at the same time was red with shame, grief, and anger. She began to hate Daburon.

"I had no such insulting thought as you imagine, mademoiselle," said the magistrate. "I was only wondering why M. de Commarin went secretly to your house, when his approaching marriage gives him the right to present himself openly, at all hours. I wondered still further how, on such a visit, he could get his clothes in the condition in which we found them."

"That is to say, monsieur," replied Claire bitterly, "that you doubt my word."

"The circumstances are such, mademoiselle——"

"You accuse me, then, of falsehood, monsieur? Why, were we criminals, we should not descend to justifying ourselves; we should never pray nor ask for pardon."

The haughty, contemptuous tone of Mademoiselle d'Arlanges could only anger the judge. How harshly she treated him! And simply because he would not consent to be her dupe.

"Above all, mademoiselle," he answered severely, "I am a magistrate; and I have a duty to perform. A crime has been committed. Everything tells me that Albert de Commarin is the guilty man. I arrest him; I examine him; and I find against him overwhelming proofs. You come and tell me that they are false; that is not enough. As long as you addressed me as a friend, you have found me kind and gentle. Now it is the judge to whom you speak: and it is the judge who replies, 'Prove it.'"

"My word, monsieur——"

"Prove it!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges arose slowly, throwing upon the judge a look filled with astonishment and suspicion.

"Will you be glad, then, monsieur," she asked, "to find Albert guilty? Will it give you pleasure to convict him? Do you hate this prisoner, whose fate is in your hands? They told me the truth, then. Can you talk of impartiality? Do not certain memories weigh heavily in the scale? Are you sure that you are not, armed with the law, revenging yourself upon a rival?"

"This is too much," murmured the judge—"this is too much."

"Do you know the unusual, the dangerous position we are in at this moment? One day, I remember, you declared your love for me. It appeared to me sincere and honest; it touched me. I was obliged to refuse you, because I loved another; and I pitied you. Now that other is accused of murder; and you are his judge, and I, between you, stand praying for him. In accepting the duty of investigation, you seemed to declare in his favour; and yet they say you are against him."

Claire's every word fell upon Daburon's heart like a blow on his face.

Was it really she who was speaking? Whence came this sudden boldness, which made her recall all those words which found an echo in his heart?

"Mademoiselle," said he, "your grief carries you beyond yourself. From you alone could I pardon what you have just said. Your ignorance of this matter makes you unjust. If you think that Albert's fate depends upon my pleasure, you deceive yourself. To convince me is nothing; it is necessary to convince others. That I should believe you is all very natural; but what weight will others attach to your testimony, when you come before them with a story, true—most true, I am confident—but highly improbable."

Tears came into Claire's eyes.

"If I have unjustly offended you, monsieur," she said, "pardon me: my unhappiness makes me forget myself."

"You cannot offend me, mademoiselle," replied the magistrate. "I have already told you that I am devoted to your service."

"Then, monsieur, help me to prove the truth of what I have said. I will tell you everything."

Daburon was fully convinced that Claire was seeking to deceive him; but her boldness astonished him.

He wondered what fable she was concocting.

"Monsieur," began Claire, "you know what obstacles have stood in the way of my marriage with Albert. The Count de Commarin did not approve of me for a daughter-in-law, because I was poor, because I possessed nothing. It took Albert three years to triumph over his father's objections. Twice the count yielded; twice he recalled the consent which he said had been extorted from him. At last, about a month ago, he gave his consent of his own accord. But these hesitations, delays, refusals had deeply hurt my grandmamma. You know her sensitive character; and, in

this case, I must confess she was right. After the wedding day had been fixed, the marquise declared that we should not be compromised and laughed at for any apparent haste in contracting so advantageous a marriage, as we had never before been accused of ambition. She decided, therefore, that, until the publication of the banns, Albert should only be admitted into the house every other day, for two hours in the afternoon, and that in her presence. We could not move her from this determination. Such was the state of affairs when, on Sunday morning, a note came to me from Albert. He told me that pressing business would prevent his coming, although that was his regular day. What could have happened to keep him away? I feared some evil. The next day I waited, impatient, distracted, until his valet brought a note for me to Schmidt. In that letter, monsieur, Albert entreated me to grant him a secret interview. It was necessary, he wrote, that he should have a long conversation with me alone, and at once. Our whole future, he added, depended upon this interview. He left me to choose the day and hour, urging me to confide in no one. I did not hesitate. I sent him word to meet me on Tuesday evening, at the little garden gate, which opened into an unoccupied street. To notify me of his presence, he was to knock just as nine o'clock sounded from the tower of Les Invalides. I knew that my grandmother had invited a number of her friends for that evening; and I thought that, by pretending a headache, I might retire early, and so be free. I knew, also, that Madame d'Arlanges would keep Schmidt with her."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," interrupted Daburon, "what day did you write to Albert?"

"Tuesday."

"Can you fix the hour?"

"I must have sent the letter between two and three o'clock."

"Thank you, mademoiselle. Go on, I beseech you."

"All my anticipations," continued Claire, "were realised. I escaped in the evening; and I descended to the garden a little before the appointed time. I had procured a key to the little gate; and I tried to open it. Unfortunately, I could not make it turn, the lock was so rusty. I exerted all my strength in vain. I was in despair, when nine o'clock sounded. At the third stroke, Albert knocked. I told him of the accident; and I threw him the key, that he might try

and unlock the door. He tried in vain. I then begged him to postpone our interview until the next day. He replied that it was impossible, that what he had to say admitted of no delay ; that during the three days that he had hesitated about confiding in me he had suffered martyrdom, and that he could endure it no longer. We were speaking, you understand, through the gate. At last, he declared that he would climb over the wall. I begged him not to do it, fearing an accident. It was very high, you see ; and the top was set with pieces of broken glass, and the acacia-branches stretched above like a hedge. But he laughed at my fears, and said that, unless I made a vigorous resistance, he was going to scale the wall. I dared not say anything ; and he risked it. Fortunately, he was very active, and got over without injury. He had come, monsieur, to tell me of the misfortune which had befallen him. We were now seated upon the little bank, you know, opposite the grove ; then, when the rain fell, we took refuge in the summer-house. It was after midnight when Albert left me, quiet and happy. He went back in the same manner, only with less danger ; because I forced him to use the gardener's ladder, which I laid beside the wall when he was on the other side."

This account, given in the simplest, most natural manner, puzzled Daburon. What was he to think ?

" Mademoiselle," he asked, " had the rain commenced when Albert climbed over the wal ?"

" No, monsieur ; the first drops fell when we were on the bank. I recollect it very well, because he opened his umbrella ; and I thought of Paul and Virginia."

" Allow me one moment, mademoiselle," said the judge.

He sat down at his desk, and rapidly wrote two letters. In the first, he gave orders for Albert's presence in his office in the Palais de Justice.

In the second he ordered a detective to go immediately to the Faubourg St. Germain to the d'Arlanges' house and examine the wall at the bottom of the garden, and notice any marks of its having been scaled, if any such existed. He explained that the wall had been climbed twice, before and after the rain ; consequently the marks of the going and the coming would be different from each other.

He enjoined upon this man to proceed with the utmost caution, and to discover a plausible pretext which would explain his investigations.

Having finished writing, the judge rang for his servant, who appeared.

" Here," said he, " are two letters, which you will take to my clerk, Constant. Tell him to read them, and to have the orders they contain executed at once—at once, you understand. Run, take a carriage, anything, but go quickly ! Ah, one word ! If Constant is not in my office, have him sought for : he will not be a great way off, as he is waiting for me. Go quick ! "

Daburon then turned to Claire.

" Have you kept the letter, mademoiselle, in which Albert asked for this interview ? "

" Yes, monsieur ; I ought to have it with me."

She arose, felt in her pocket, and drew out a much rumpled piece of paper.

" Here it is ! "

The judge of inquiry took it. A suspicion crossed him. This compromising letter was quite conveniently in Claire's pocket ; and yet young girls do not usually thus expose requests for interviews. At a glance, he ran over the ten lines of the note.

" No date," he muttered, " no stamp—nothing at all."

Claire did not hear him ; she was racking her brain to find proofs of the interview.

" Monsieur," said she suddenly, " it often happens that, when we wish to be, and believe ourselves alone, we are nevertheless observed. Call all of my grandmamma's servants, and inquire if any of them saw Albert that night."

" Inquire of your servants ! Are you not dreaming, mademoiselle ? "

" What, monsieur ? You fear that I shall be compromised. What of that, if he is only freed ? "

Daburon could not help admiring her.

What sublime devotion in this young girl, whether she spoke the truth or not ! He could understand her violence of an hour ago, now that he knew her character so well.

" That is not all," she added ; " the key to the little gate which I threw to Albert : he did not return it to me ; he must have forgotten it. If they find it in his possession, that will well prove that he was in the garden."

" I will give the orders, mademoiselle."

" There is still another means," continued Claire ; " while I am here, send to examine the wall."

She seemed to think of everything.

" That is already done, mademoiselle," replied Daburon. " I will not hide from you that one of the letters which I have just sent off ordered an examination of your grandmother's house—a very quiet examination, though, be assured."

Claire rose joyfully, and for the second time held out her hand to the judge.

" Oh, thanks ! " said she, " a thousand thanks ! Now I am sure that you are with me. But I have still another idea : Albert ought to have the note I wrote on Tuesday."

" No, mademoiselle, he has burned it."

Claire's eyes drooped ; she drew back.

She imagined a touch of irony in the judge's reply. There was none, however. The magistrate remembered the letter thrown into the fire by Albert on Tuesday afternoon. It could be none other than this of Claire's. It was to her, then, that the words, " She cannot resist me," applied. He understood, now, the action and the remark.

" Do you know, mademoiselle," he pursued, " that M. de Commarin has led justice astray, and has exposed me to a most deplorable error, when it would have been so easy to have told me all this ? "

" It seems to me, monsieur, that an honest man could not confess that he had obtained an interview with a lady until he had obtained full permission from her own lips. He ought to risk his life sooner than the honour of her who has trusted in him ; but be assured Albert had confidence in me."

He had nothing to reply to this ; for the sentiments expressed by Mademoiselle d'Arlanges gave a meaning to some of Albert's replies in the examination.

" This is not all yet, mademoiselle," continued the judge ; " all that you have told me here you must repeat in my office, at the Palais de Justice. My clerk must take down your testimony ; and you must sign it. This proceeding will be painful ; but it is a necessary formality."

" Ah, monsieur, I will do it with pleasure. What can I refuse, when I know that he is in prison ? I am determined to do everything. If I am needed at the court of assize, I will go—yes, I will be present ; and, above all and before all, I will speak the truth. Doubtless," she added sadly, " I shall be much exposed : I shall be looked upon as a heroine of romance ; but what does public opinion matter, the

blame or approval of the world, since I am sure of his love?"

She arose, readjusting her cloak and the strings of her hat.

"Must I await the return of those who are examining the wall?" she asked.

"It is not at all necessary, mademoiselle."

"Then," she continued in a sweet voice, "I can only beg you" (her eyes implored) "to let Albert out of prison."

"He shall be liberated as soon as possible; I give you my word."

"Oh, to-day, dear M. Daburon, to-day, I beg of you—now, this moment! Since he is innocent, be kind, since you are our friend. Do you wish me to go down on my knees?"

The judge had only time to extend his arms, and prevent her.

He was choking with emotion, unhappy man!

Ah, how much he envied the prisoner's lot!

"That which you ask of me is impossible, mademoiselle," said he tenderly, "impracticable, upon my honour. Ah, if it depended upon me alone, I should not be able, even were he guilty, to see you weep, and to resist."

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges, so firm up to this time, could no longer restrain her sobs.

"Unhappy man!" she cried, "he is suffering; he is in prison. I am free; and yet I can do nothing for him. Great heaven! inspire me with words to touch the heart of men! At their feet I will cast myself for pardon."

She suddenly stopped, surprised at having uttered such a word.

"Pardon!" she repeated fiercely; "he has no need of pardon. Why am I only a woman? Can I find no man who will aid me? Yes," she said, after a moment's reflection, "there is one man who owes himself to Albert, since he it was who put him in this position—the Count de Commarin. He is his father, and has yet abandoned him. Ah, well, I will remind him that he has a son still."

The magistrate arose to see her to the door; but she had already disappeared, taking with her the good Schmidt.

Daburon, more dead than alive, sank back in his chair. His eyes filled with tears.

"What a noble woman she is!" he murmured. "Ah, I made no vulgar choice. I had divined and understood all these good qualities."

He had never loved her so much; and he felt that he

should never be consoled for not having won her love in return. But, in the midst of his meditations, a sudden thought passed like a flash across his brain.

Had Claire spoken the truth ? Had she not been playing a rôle, assumed to deceive him ? No, surely no !

But she might have been deceived—might have been the dupe of some skilful trick.

Père Tabaret's prediction was now realised.

Tabaret had said, " Look out for an unobjectionable alibi."

How could he show the falsity of this one, planned in advance, affirmed by Claire, who was herself deceived ?

How could he foil a plan, so well laid that the prisoner was able without danger to await certain results, with his hands bound, and without himself moving in the matter ?

And yet, if Claire's story were true, and Albert innocent . . .

The judge struggled in the midst of inextricable difficulties, without a plan, without an idea.

He rose.

" Oh," he said in a loud voice, as though encouraging himself, " at the Palais all will be unravelled."

CHAPTER XVI

Daburon had been surprised at Claire's visit.

M. de Commarin was still more so, when his *valet de chambre* whispered to him that Mademoiselle d'Arlanges asked a moment's conversation with him.

Daburon had let a handsome card-plate fall ; M. de Commarin, who was at breakfast, let his knife fall.

Like the judge, he exclaimed :

" Claire ! "

He hesitated to receive her, fearing a painful and disagreeable scene.

She had had, he knew, very slight affection for him, who had for so long repulsed her with such obstinacy. What could she want with him ? To inquire about Albert, of course. And what could he reply ?

She would probably have some nervous attack or other ; and her system, as well as his, would be disturbed.

However, he thought of the great grief she must have experienced ; and he pitied her.

He reflected that it would be cruel, as well as unworthy of his character, to keep himself from her who was to have been his daughter—the Viscountess de Commarin.

He sent a message, asking her to wait one instant in the little salon on the ground floor.

He did not keep her long, his appetite having been destroyed by the announcement of her presence. He was prepared for anything disagreeable.

When he entered, Claire bowed to him with one of those graceful, yet highly dignified bends which distinguished the Marquise d'Arlanges.

" Monsieur——" she began.

" You come, do you not, my poor child, to obtain news of the unhappy boy ? " asked M. de Commarin.

He had interrupted Claire, wishing to go straight to the point, in order to get it the more quickly over.

" No, monsieur," replied the young girl ; " I come, on the contrary, to bring you news. Albert is innocent."

The count looked at her most attentively, persuaded that grief had affected her reason ; but her madness in this instance was very quiet.

" I have never doubted it," continued Claire ; " but now I have the most positive proofs."

" Do you feel sure of what you said ? " inquired the count, whose eyes betrayed his doubt.

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges understood his thoughts ; her interview with Daburon had given her experience.

" I say nothing which is not of the utmost accuracy," she replied, " and easily proved. I have just come from the judge of inquiry, M. Daburon, who is one of my grandmamma's friends ; and, after what I have told him, he is persuaded that Albert is innocent."

" He told you that, Claire ! " exclaimed the count. " My child, are you sure ? Are you not deceiving yourself ? "

" No, monsieur. I told him something, of which the world is ignorant, and of which Albert, who is a gentleman, could not speak. I told him that Albert passed with me, in my grandmamma's garden, all that evening when the crime was committed. He had asked an interview of me——"

" But your word will not be sufficient."

" There are proofs of it which justice has by this time."

" Heavens ! Is it really possible ? " cried the count, who was beside himself.

" Ah, monsieur ! " said Mademoiselle d'Arlanges bitterly, " you are like the judge ; you thought it impossible. You are his father, and suspected him. You could not have known him, then. You abandoned him, without trying to defend him. Ah, I never doubted him ! "

We can easily be induced to believe true what we are anxiously longing for. M. de Commarin was not difficult to convince. Without reasons, without discussion, he put faith in Claire's assertions. He shared her convictions, without asking whether they were wise or prudent.

Yes, he had been overcome by the positiveness of the judge : he had acknowledged the improbability of his son's innocence ; and he had bowed his head. One word from this young girl restored him. Albert innocent ? This thought descended upon his heart like dew from heaven.

Claire appeared to him a messenger bringing sunshine and hope.

During the last three days he had discovered how great his affection for Albert was. He had loved him tenderly ; for he had never been able to discard him, in spite of his frightful suspicions about his paternity.

For three days the remembrance of the crime imputed to the unhappy boy, the thought of the punishment which awaited him, had nearly killed him ; and now he was innocent !

No more shame, no more scandal, no more stains upon the escutcheon ; the name of Commarin would no longer resound before the tribunals.

" But now, mademoiselle," demanded the count, " are they going to release him ? "

" Alas ! monsieur, I demanded that they should at once place him at liberty. It is just, is it not, since he is not guilty? But the judge only replied that it was not possible ; that he was not the master ; that Albert's fate depended on many others. It was then that I resolved to come to you for aid."

" Is there anything in my power ? "

" I at least hope so. I am only a poor girl, very ignorant ; and I know no one in the world. I do not know what can be done in behalf of a man unjustly detained in prison. There ought, however, to be some means for obtaining justice for him. Will you not try what can be done, monsieur —you, who are his father ? "

" Yes," replied M. de Commarin quickly—" yes, and without a moment's loss."

Since Albert's arrest, the count had been plunged in a dull stupor. In his profound grief, seeing about him only ruin and disaster, he had done nothing to shake off this mental paralysis. Ordinarily very active, he sat all day now without moving. He congratulated himself that his condition prevented his feeling the immensity of his misfortune. Claire's voice sounded in his ear like the Last Trump. The frightful darkness was dispelled ; he saw a glimmering in the horizon ; he recovered the energy of his youth.

" Let us go," he said.

But suddenly the radiance in his face changed to sadness, mixed with anger.

" But yet," he said, " where ? At what door can we knock with any hope of success ? In the olden times, I should seek the king ; but to-day the emperor will not interfere with the law. He will tell me to await the decision of the tribunals, that he can do nothing. Wait. And Albert is counting the minutes in agony ! We shall certainly obtain justice ; but to do it promptly is an art taught in schools that I have not frequented."

" Let us try, at least, monsieur," persisted Claire. " Let us seek out judges, generals, ministers. Only lead me to them. I will speak ; and you shall see if we do not succeed."

The count took Claire's little hands between his own, and held them a moment, pressing them tenderly.

" Brave girl ! " he cried. " You are a noble, courageous woman, Claire. Good blood never fails. I should not have known you. Yes, you shall be my daughter ; and you shall be happy together—Albert and you. But we mustn't rush about everywhere, like wild geese. We need someone to point out whom we should address—some guide, advocate, notary. Ah ! " he cried, " I have it—Noel."

Claire raised her eyes to the count's in surprise.

" He is my son," replied M. de Commarin, evidently embarrassed—" my other son, Albert's brother—the best and worthiest of men," he added, repeating quite appropriately a phrase already used by Daburon. " He is an advocate ; he knows all about the Palais ; he will guide us."

Noel's name, thus thrown into the midst of this conversation so full of hope, oppressed Claire's heart.

The count perceived her affright.

" Don't feel anxious, dear child," he said. " Noel is good ; and, I will tell you more, loves Albert. Do not shake your head so ; Noel told me himself, on this very spot, that he

did not believe Albert guilty. He declared that he intended doing everything to dispel the fatal mistake, and that he would be his advocate."

These assertions did not seem to reassure the young girl. She said to herself, " What has this Noel accomplished for Albert ? " She could think of nothing.

" I will send for him," said M. de Commarin ; " he is now with Albert's mother, who brought him up, and who is now on her death-bed."

" Albert's mother ? "

" Yes, my child. Albert will explain to you what may perhaps seem to you an enigma. Now time presses. But I think——"

He stopped suddenly. He thought that, instead of sending for Noel at Madame Gerdy's, he might go there himself. He should thus see Valerie ! And he had longed to see her again so much !

It was one of those actions which the heart urges, but which we do not dare risk ; because a thousand subtle reasons and interests are against it.

We wish, we desire, we long for it ; and yet we struggle, combat, resist. But, if an opportunity occurs, we are only too happy to seize it ; then we have, at least, one excuse to silence our conscience.

In thus yielding everything to the impulse of our feelings, we can say, " It was not I who wished it ; it was fate."

" It will be better, perhaps," observed the count, " to go to Noel."

" Let us start then, monsieur."

" I hardly know, my child," said the old gentleman hesitating, " whether I may, whether I ought, to take you with me. Propriety——"

" Ah, monsieur, why talk of propriety ? " replied Claire impetuously. " With you, and for his sake, I can go anywhere. Is it not indispensable that I should give the circumstances ? Only send word to my grandmamma by Schmidt, who will come back here and await my return. I am ready, monsieur."

" Well," said the count.

Then, ringing so violently that he broke the bell-cord, he cried, " My carriage ! "

In descending the stairway, he insisted upon Claire's taking his arm. The gallant and elegant politeness of the Count d'Artois reappeared.

" You have taken twenty years off my shoulders," he said. " It is fit that I should do homage for the youth you have given me."

When Claire had entered the carriage, " Rue St. Lazare," he said to the footman, " quick ! "

Whenever the count said, on entering his carriage, " quick," pedestrians had to get out of the way. But the coachman was a skilful driver ; and they arrived without accident.

Aided by the directions of the porter, the count and the young girl went towards Madame Gerdy's apartment. The count mounted slowly, holding tightly to the railing, stopping at each landing to breathe. He was, then, to see her again. This emotion pressed his heart like a vice.

" Noel Gerdy ? " he asked of the maid.

The advocate had just that moment gone out. She did not know where he had gone ; but he had said he should not be out more than half an hour.

" We will wait for him, then," said the count.

He advanced ; and the maid drew back to let them pass. Noel had, in so many words, forbidden her to admit any visitors ; but the Count de Commarin was one of those whose appearance makes servants forget all their orders.

Three persons were in the room when the maid introduced the count and Mademoiselle d'Arlanges.

There was the parish priest, the doctor, and a tall man, an officer of the Legion of Honour, whose carriage and figure indicated the veteran that he was.

They were conversing near the mantel ; and the arrival of strangers appeared to astonish them.

In bowing, in response to M. de Commarin's and Claire's salute, they seemed to inquire their business ; but the hesitation was brief : the soldier offered Mademoiselle d'Arlanges a chair.

The count saw that his presence was inopportune ; and he felt called upon to introduce himself, and explain his visit.

" You will excuse me, messieurs," said he, " if I am inconsiderate. I need not tell you that, in asking permission to await Noel, I have the most pressing need of seeing him. I am the Count de Commarin."

At this name, the old soldier left the chair whose back he still held, and assumed all the haughtiness of his profession. An angry light flashed in his eyes, and he made a threatening

gesture. His lips moved, as if he were about to speak ; but he restrained himself, and retired, his head bowed, to the window.

Neither the count nor the others remarked these various movements ; but they did not escape Claire.

While Mademoiselle d'Arlanges sat down, confused, the count, also much embarrassed at his position, approached the priest, and in a low voice asked :

" What is, M. l'Abbé, Madame Gerdy's condition ? "

The doctor, who had a sharp ear, heard the question, and approached quickly.

It was very pleasant to speak to a personage as celebrated as the Count de Commarin, and to become acquainted with him.

" I fear, monsieur," he said, " that she cannot live another day."

The count pressed his hand against his forehead, as though he had felt a sudden pain. He hesitated to inquire further.

After a moment of chilling silence, he resolved to go on.

" Does she recognise her friends ? " he murmured.

" No, monsieur. Since last evening, however, there has been a great change. She was very uneasy all last night ; she had moments of fierce delirium. About an hour ago we thought she was recovering her senses ; and we sent for the priest."

" Very useless, though," put in the priest ; " it is a sad misfortune. Her reason is quite gone, poor woman ! I have known her ten years. I have seen her nearly every week ; and I never knew a more excellent woman."

" She must suffer dreadfully," said the doctor.

Almost on the instant, and as if to bear out the doctor's words, they heard stifled cries from the next room, the door of which was open.

" Did you hear ? " exclaimed the count, trembling from head to foot.

Claire understood nothing of this strange scene. Dark presentiments oppressed her ; she felt as though she were enveloped by an atmosphere of evil. She grew frightened, and drew near the count.

" Is she really there ? " asked M. de Commarin.

" Yes, monsieur," harshly answered the old soldier, who had come near, " she is."

At another time the count would have noticed the

soldier's tone, and have resented it. Now, he did not even raise his eyes. He remained insensible to everything. Was she not there, two steps from him? His thoughts were in the past; it seemed to him but yesterday that he had quitted her for the last time.

"I should much like to see her," he said timidly.

"That is impossible," replied the old soldier.

"Why?" stammered the count.

"At least, M. de Commarin," replied the soldier, "let her die in peace."

The count started, as if he had been struck. His eyes encountered those of the veteran; they fell like a criminal's before his judge.

"Nothing need prevent monsieur's entering Madame Gerdy's room," put in the doctor, who purposely saw nothing of all this. "She would probably not notice his presence, and if——"

"Oh, she would perceive nothing!" said the priest. "I have just spoken to her, taken her hand; she is still insensible."

The old soldier reflected deeply.

"Enter," said he at last to the count. "Perhaps it is God's will."

The count tottered, so that the doctor sprang forward to assist him. He gently pushed him away.

The doctor and the priest entered with him; Claire and the old soldier remained at the threshold of the door, opposite the bed.

The count took three or four steps, and was obliged to stop. He wished, but could not go farther.

Could this dying woman really be Valerie?

He had to tax his memory severely: nothing in those withered features, nothing in that troubled face, recalled the beautiful, the adored Valerie of his youth. He did not even know her.

But she knew him, or rather divined, felt his presence. Moved by a supernatural force, she raised herself, exposing her shoulders and emaciated arms. With a violent gesture, she pushed away the ice from her forehead, throwing back her still plentiful hair, bathed with perspiration, which fell upon the pillow.

"Guy!" she cried. "Guy!"

The count trembled all over.

He stood more immovable than those unhappy people who, according to popular belief, when struck by lightning remain standing, but crumble into dust if touched.

He did not perceive that which immediately struck all others present—the transformation in the sick woman. Her contracted features relaxed ; a celestial joy spread over her face ; and her eyes, hollowed by disease, assumed an expression of infinite tenderness.

" Guy," said she in a voice heart-breaking by its sweetness, " you have come at last ! How long, O my God ! I have waited for you ! You cannot think what I have suffered in your absence. I was dying of grief, without one hope of seeing you again. They have kept you from me. Who, who was it ? Your relations still ? Cruel, cruel ! Did you not tell them that no one could love you here below as I did ! No ; that was not it. I, I forget. I—were you not angry when you left me ? Your friends wished to separate us ; they said that I drew you away from her. Who have I injured that I should have so many enemies ? They envied my happiness ; and we were so happy ! But you did not believe the wicked calumny : you scorned it ; for are you not here ? "

The nun, who had risen on seeing so many enter the sick-room, now opened her eyes with astonishment.

" I betray you ? " continued the dying woman, apparently wild at the thought. " Was I not yours, your own, heart and soul ? To me you were everything ; and there was nothing I could expect or hope from another which you had not already given me. Was I not yours, body and soul, from the first ? I never hesitated to give myself entirely to you ; I felt that I was born for you. Guy, can you forget that ? I was working for a lace-maker. and was barely earning a living. You told me that you were a poor student ; and I felt that you were depriving yourself for my sake. You wished to fit up our little cottage at St. Michael. It was lovely, with its fresh paper all covered with flowers, which we ourselves hung. How delightful it was ! From the window, there was a view of the great trees at the Tuileries ; and, by a little imagination, we could see the setting sun through the arches of the bridge. Oh, those happy times ! The first time that we walked out into the country together, one Sunday, you brought me a more beautiful dress than I had ever dreamed of, and boots so tiny that it was a shame to walk in them. But you had

deceived me ; you were not a poor student. One day, in taking my work home, I met you in an elegant carriage, behind which rode tall footmen in a livery covered with gold. I could not believe my eyes. That evening you told me the truth, that you were a noble of great wealth. Oh, my darling ! why did you tell me ? "

Had she her reason, or was this delirium which was speaking?

Great tears rolled down the wrinkled face of the Count de Commarin ; and the doctor and priest wondered at this sad spectacle of an old man weeping like a child.

Last evening only, the count had thought his heart dead ; and now this voice, sinking into his heart, was sufficient to recall the fresh, powerful feelings of his youth. How many years had passed away since !

" Then," continued Madame Gerdy, " we left St. Michael. You wished it ; and I obeyed, in spite of my apprehensions. You told me that, to please you, I must resemble the great ladies. You provided teachers for me ; for I had been so ignorant that I scarcely knew how to sign my name. Do you remember the queer spelling in my first letter ? Ah, Guy, if you had only been really a poor student ! When I knew that you were so rich, I lost my simplicity and my gaiety. I feared that you would think me covetous—that you would imagine that your fortune influenced my love. Men who, like you, have millions, must be very unhappy. They must be always doubting and full of suspicions ; they can never be sure whether it is themselves or their gold which is loved : and this makes them defiant, jealous, cruel. Oh, my dearest ! why did we leave our little cottage ? There we were happy. Why did you not leave me always where you had found me ? Did you not know that the sight of happiness irritates mankind ? If we had been wise, we should have hid our happiness like a crime. You thought to raise me ; you only sank me lower. You were proud of our love ; you published it abroad. Vainly I asked you in mercy to leave me in obscurity, and unknown. Soon the whole town knew that I was your mistress. It was reported, in your own circles, that you were ruining yourself for me. How I blushed at the flaunting luxury you thrust upon me ! You were satisfied, because my beauty became celebrated ; I wept because my shame became so too. They talked about me, as about women

who make their lovers commit the greatest follies. Was not my name in the papers? And it was through the same papers that I learned of your approaching marriage. Unhappy woman! I should have fled from you; but I had not the courage. I resigned myself, without an effort, to the most humiliating, the most shameful of lots. You were married; and I continued your mistress. Oh, what anguish I suffered during that terrible evening! I was alone in my own house, in that room so associated with you; and you were marrying another. I said to myself, 'At this moment, a pure, noble young girl is giving herself to him.' I said again, 'What oaths is that mouth, which has so often pressed my lips, now taking?' Often since that dreadful misfortune I have asked the good God what crime I had committed that I should be so terribly punished? This was the crime: I continued your mistress, and your wife died. I had only seen her once, and then scarcely for a moment; but she looked at you; and I knew that she loved as deeply as I. And, Guy, it was our love that killed her!"

She stopped, exhausted; but none of the bystanders moved. They listened breathlessly, and waited with feverish emotion for her to resume.

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges had not the strength to remain standing; she fell upon her knees, and pressed her handkerchief to her mouth to keep back her sobs. Was not this Albert's mother?

The worthy sister was alone unmoved; she had seen, she said to herself, many such deliriums before. She understood absolutely nothing of the scene.

"These people are very foolish," she thought, "to pay so much attention to the ramblings of insanity."

She thought she had more sense than the others. Approaching the bed, she began to cover the sick woman.

"Come, madame," said she, "cover yourself, or you will catch cold."

"Sister!" remonstrated the doctor and the priest at the same moment.

"Jupiter Ammon!" cried the soldier, "let her speak."

"Who," continued the sick woman, unconscious of all that was passing about her—"who can tell what I have endured? Oh, the wretches! They set spies upon me; they discovered that an officer came frequently to see me. That officer was my brother, my dear Louis. When he was

eighteen years old, getting no work, he enlisted, saying to mother that there would now be one mouth less in the family. He was a good soldier ; and the officers always liked him. He joined his regiment ; he taught himself ; and he gradually rose in rank. He was promoted to lieutenant, captain, and finally became major. Louis always loved me ; but I seldom saw him. He was a non-commissioned officer when he first knew that I had a lover ; and he was so enraged that I feared he would never forgive me. But he did forgive me, saying that my constancy in my wrong was its only excuse. Ah, my friend, he was more jealous of your honour than you yourself ! He came to see me in secret, because I had placed him in the unhappy position of blushing for his sister. My name never passed his lips. Could a brave soldier confess that his sister was the mistress of a count ? That it might not be known, I took the utmost precautions, but, alas ! only to make you doubt me. When Louis knew what was said, he wished, in his blind rage, to challenge you ; and then I was obliged to prove to him that he had no right to defend me. What misery ! Ah, I have paid dearly for my years of stolen happiness ! But you are here ; and all is forgotten ; for you do believe me, do you not, Guy ? I will call Louis. He will come ; he will tell you that I do not lie ; and you cannot doubt his, a soldier's word."

" Yes, on my honour," spoke the old soldier, " what my sister says is the truth."

The dying woman did not hear him ; she continued in a voice panting with weariness :

" How your presence revives me ! I feel that I am growing stronger. I have been sick. I do not deserve to be happy to-day ; but embrace me ! "

She held out her hands, and raised her lips as if to kiss him.

" But it is on one condition, Guy, that you will leave me my child. Oh, I beg you, I entreat you not to take him from me ; leave him to me. What is a mother without her son ? You are anxious to give him an illustrious name, an immense fortune. No. You tell me that this sacrifice will be for his good. No. My child is mine ; I will protect him. The world has no honours, no riches which can replace a mother's care beside the cradle. You wish by the exchange to give me another's child. Never ! What, shall that woman embrace my boy ? No, no. Take away this strange child from me ; it fills me with horror. I want my own Noel !

Ah, do not insist, do not threaten me with your anger ! Don't leave me. I yield, and then I will die. Guy, give up this fatal purpose ; the thought alone is crime. Cannot my prayers, my tears, can nothing move you ? Ah, well, God will punish us in our old age. All will be discovered. The day will come when these children will demand a fearful reckoning. Guy, I foresee the future ; I see my son coming to me, justly angered. What does he say ? Great heaven ! Oh, those letters, those letters, sweet memories of our love ! My son, he threatens me ! He strikes me ! Ah, help ! A son strike his mother ! Tell no one of it : don't let it ever be known. God, what torture ! He knows well that I am his mother. He pretends not to believe me. This is too much ! Guy, pardon, oh, my dearest ! I had not power to resist, nor the courage to obey you."

At this moment the door leading to the stairway opened, and Noel appeared, pale as usual, but calm and composed.

The dying woman saw him ; and it affected her like an electric shock.

A terrible trembling shook her whole body ; her eyes grew inordinately large ; her hair seemed to stand on end. She raised herself on her elbows, pointed at Noel, and in a loud voice exclaimed :

" Murderer ! "

Convulsively she fell back on the bed. They hastened forward : she was dead.

A deep silence prevailed.

Such is the majesty of death, and the terror which accompanies it, that before it even the strongest and most sceptical bow their heads.

For an instant, passions and interests are forgotten. Involuntarily we are drawn together, when some mutual friend breathes his last in our presence.

All the bystanders were deeply moved by this painful scene, this last confession, wrested from a delirious and unhappy woman.

But the last word uttered by Madame Gerdy, " Murderer ! " surprised no one.

All, with the exception of the nun, knew of the unhappy accusation which had been made against Albert.

To him they applied the malediction of the unfortunate mother.

Noel appeared to totter. Kneeling near the bedside of

her who had been as a mother to him, he took one of her hands, and pressed it close to his lips.

" Dead ! " he groaned ; " she is dead ! "

By his side, the nun and the priest knelt, and repeated in a low voice the prayers for the dead.

They implored God to shed his peace and mercy on this departed soul.

They begged for a little happiness in heaven for her who had suffered so much on this earth.

Falling into a chair, his head back, the Count de Commarin was more overwhelmed, more livid, than this dead woman, his old love, once so beautiful.

Claire and the doctor pressed toward him.

They undid his cravat and opened the collar of his shirt, or he would have suffocated.

With the help of the old soldier, whose red, tearful eye told of suppressed grief, they moved the count's chair to the half-opened window for a little air. Three days before, this scene would have killed him.

But the heart grows hardened by misfortune, as hands by labour.

" Tears would relieve him," whispered the doctor to Claire.

M. de Commarin gradually recovered, and, with clearness of thought, returned the intensity of suffering.

The prostration was followed by great struggles in his mind. Nature seemed striving to sustain the misfortune. We never feel the entire shock at once ; it is only afterwards that we realise the extent and profundity of any misfortune.

The count's gaze was fixed upon the bed where lay Valerie's body. There, then, was all that remained of her. The soul—that soul, so devoted, so tender—had flown.

What would he not give if God would but return that unfortunate woman for a day, for only an hour of life and reason ? With what transports of repentance would he cast himself at her feet, to implore pardon, to tell her how much horror he had for his past conduct. How he had misunderstood the inexhaustible love of that angel ! Upon a suspicion, without deigning to inquire, without hearing her, he had crushed her with his cold contempt. Why had he not investigated the matter ? He would have spared himself twenty years of doubt as to Albert's birth. Instead of an isolated existence, he would have had a happy, joyous life.

Then he recalled the death of the countess. She also had loved, even to her death.

He had not understood them ; he had killed them both.

The hour of expiation had come ; and he could not say, " Lord, the punishment is too great."

And yet, what punishment, what wretchedness, during the last five days !

" Yes," he stammered, " she predicted it. Why did I not listen to her ? "

Madame Gerdy's brother pitied the old man, so severely tried. He held out his hand.

" M. de Commarin," he said, in a grave, sad voice, " my sister pardoned you long ago, even if she ever had an ill-feeling against you. It is my turn to-day ; I forgive you sincerely."

" Thanks, monsieur," murmured the count—" thanks ! " And then added, " Dead ! "

" Yes," said Claire, " she breathed her last in the idea that her son was guilty. And you did not undeceive her."

" At least her son," cried the count, " should be free to render her his last duties ; yes, he must be, Noel ! "

The advocate had drawn near his father, and had heard all.

" I have promised, father," he replied, " to save him."

For the first time, Mademoiselle d'Arlanges was face to face with Noel. Their eyes met ; and she could not restrain a movement of repugnance, which the advocate perceived.

" Albert is already saved," she said bitterly. " What we ask is, that prompt justice shall be done him ; that he shall be immediately set at liberty. The judge now knows the truth."

" The truth ? " exclaimed the advocate.

" Yes ; Albert passed at my house, with me, the evening the crime was committed."

Noel looked at her surprised : so singular a confession from such a mouth, without explanation, might well surprise him.

She drew herself up haughtily.

" I am Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlanges, monsieur," she said.

M. de Commarin now quickly ran over all the incidents reported by Claire.

When he had finished :

" Monsieur," replied Noel, " you see my position ; leave this until to-morrow."

" To-morrow ! " interrupted the count indignantly,

" you said, I believe, to-morrow ! Honour demands, monsieur, that we act to-day, this moment. You can do honour to this poor woman much better by delivering her son than by praying for her."

Noel bowed low.

" To hear your wish, monsieur, is to obey it," he said. " I go. This evening, at your house, I will have the honour of giving you an account of my proceedings. Perhaps I shall be able to bring Albert with me."

He spoke, and, embracing the dead woman for the last time, went out.

Soon the count and Mademoiselle d'Arlanges followed.

The old soldier went to the mayor's, to make his declaration of the death, and to fulfil the necessary formalities.

The nun alone remained, awaiting the priest, which the curé had promised to send to watch the corpse.

The daughter of St. Vincent felt neither fear nor embarrassment ; she had been so many times in just such scenes.

Her prayers said, she arose, and went about the room, putting everything in the proper order after a death.

She removed all traces of the sickness, hid the vials and little cups, burnt some sugar upon the fire shovel, and, on a table covered with a white cloth at the head of the bed, placed some lighted candles, a crucifix with holy water, and a branch of palm.

CHAPTER XVII

Troubled and distressed by the revelations of Mademoiselle d'Arlanges, Daburon was ascending the stairway that led to the gallery of the judges of inquiry, when he was met by Père Tabaret. The sight pleased him ; and so he called out :

" M. Tabaret ! "

But the old fellow, who showed every sign of the most intense agitation, was scarcely disposed to stop, or to lose a single minute.

" You must excuse me," he said, saluting him, " but I am expected at home."

" I hope, however——"

" Oh, he is innocent," interrupted Père Tabaret. " I have already some proofs, and before three days——

But you are going to see Gevrol's man with the rings in his ears. He is very acute, is this Gevrol; I have misjudged him."

And, without listening to another word, he hurried on, jumping down three steps at a time, at the risk of breaking his neck.

Daburon, disappointed, also hastened on.

In the gallery, before his office door, on a bench of rough wood, sat Albert under the charge of a *garde de Paris*.

"You will be summoned immediately," said the judge to the prisoner, on opening the door.

In the office, Constant was talking with a little man of a sorry appearance, who might be taken, from his dress, for an inhabitant of the Batignoles, even without the enormous false pin which shone in his cravat, and which betrayed the detective.

"You received my letters?" asked Daburon of his clerk. "Monsieur, your orders have been executed: the prisoner is without; and here is Martin, who has this moment arrived from Les Invalides."

"That is very well," said the magistrate in a satisfied tone. And, turning towards the detective:

"Well, Martin," he asked, "what have you found?"

"Monsieur, someone has climbed over the wall."

"Lately?"

"Five or six days ago."

"You are sure of this?"

"As sure as I am that I see Constant at this moment mending his pen."

"The marks are plain?"

"As plain as the nose on my face, if I may so express myself. The thief—it was done by a thief, I imagine"—continued Martin, who was a great talker, "the thief entered before the rain, and returned after it, as you had conjectured. This circumstance is easy to establish, if you examine the marks of the ascent and the descent on the wall on the side towards the street. These marks are holes, made by the end of the boot. The first are clean; the others, muddy. The scamp—he was a nimble fellow—entered by the aid of his wrists and legs; but, in going out, he enjoyed the luxury of a ladder, which he threw down as soon as he was over. It is very evident where it was placed below, by means of the holes made by the fellow's weight; above, by the displaced mortar."

" Is that all ? " asked the judge.

" Not yet, monsieur. Three of the pieces of bottle which covered the top of the wall have been torn away. Many of the acacia-branches, which extend out over the wall, have been bent and broken. From a thorn of one of these branches, I took this little piece of pearl-grey kid, which appears to me to have come from a glove."

The judge took the piece with eagerness.

It was really a small fragment of a grey glove.

" You took care, I hope, Martin, not to attract attention at the house where you made this investigation ? "

" Certainly, monsieur. I examined the exterior, at my leisure. After that, disguising myself at a wine-merchant's around the corner, I called at the Marquise d'Arlanges' house, giving myself out to be the servant of a neighbouring duchess, who was in despair at having lost a favourite, and, if I may so speak, an eloquent paroquet. They very kindly gave me permission to look in the garden ; and, as I spoke as disrespectfully as possible of my pretended mistress, they took me for an unmistakable servant."

" You are an adroit and prompt fellow, Martin," interrupted the judge. " I am well satisfied with you ; and I will report you favourably at headquarters."

He rang ; while the detective, delighted at the praises he had received, moved backwards to the door, bowing the while.

Albert was then brought in.

" Have you decided, monsieur," asked the judge of inquiry without preamble, " to give an account of how you spent Tuesday evening ? "

" I have already given it, monsieur."

" No, monsieur, you have not ; and I regret to say that you have told me a falsehood."

Albert, at this apparent insult, turned red, and his eyes flashed.

" I know all that you did on that evening," continued the judge ; " because the law, as I have already said, is ignorant of nothing that it is important for it to know."

He sought Albert's eye, met it, and said slowly :

" I have seen Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlanges."

At that name the prisoner's features, restrained by a firm resolve not to betray himself, relaxed.

The immense sensation of delight which he must have felt

can easily be imagined. He was like a man who escapes by a miracle from an imminent danger which he had despaired of avoiding.

But he made no reply.

" Mademoiselle d'Arlanges," continued the judge, " has told me where you were on Tuesday evening."

Albert still hesitated.

" I am not setting a trap for you," added the judge. " I give you my word of honour. She has told me all, you understand ? "

This time Albert decided to speak.

His explanations corresponded almost exactly with Claire's—not one detail more. Henceforth, doubt was impossible.

Mademoiselle d'Arlanges' reliability had not been shaken. Either Albert was innocent, or she was his accomplice.

Could she knowingly be the accomplice of this dreadful crime ? No ; she could not even be suspected of it.

But now where to find the assassin ?

For, in the sight of justice, when a crime is once discovered, there must be a criminal.

" You see, monsieur," said the judge severely to Albert, " you did deceive me. You risked your life, monsieur, and, what is still more serious, you exposed me, you exposed justice, to a most deplorable mistake. Why did you not tell me the truth ? "

" Monsieur," replied Albert, " Mademoiselle d'Arlanges, in according me a meeting, trusted in my honour."

" And you would have died rather than speak of this interview ? " interrupted Daburon, with a touch of irony. " That is very fine, monsieur, worthy of the days of chivalry ! "

" I am not the hero that you suppose, monsieur," replied the prisoner simply. " If I said that I did not count on Claire, I should be telling a falsehood ; I was only waiting for her. I knew that, on learning of my arrest, she would brave everything to save me. But they might have hid it from her ; that was my only fear. In that case, however they might have construed my silence, I think I should not have spoken her name."

There was no appearance of bravado. What Albert said, he thought and felt. Daburon repented his irony.

" Monsieur," he said kindly, " you must return to your

prison. I cannot release you yet ; but you will be no longer in solitary confinement. You will be treated with every attention due a prisoner whose innocence is at least probable."

Albert bowed, and thanked him. He was then removed by the *garde*.

"We are now ready for Gevrol," said the judge to his clerk.

The chief of detectives was absent. They had inquired for him at the préfecture ; but his witness, the man with the rings in his ears, was without, in the gallery.

They told him to enter.

He was one of those short, thick-set men, powerful as oaks, of an iron frame, who look as though they could carry almost any weight on their broad shoulders.

His white hair and beard made his red skin, burnt, scorched, tanned by the inclemencies of the weather, by the storms of the sea and the sun of the tropics, appear the more hard favoured and ugly.

He had large hands, blackened, hard, callous, with the thumbs so broad and knotted that they must have had the pressure of a vice.

Large rings, in the form of an anchor, hung from his ears. He wore the costume of a well-to-do Norman fisher, when he is dressed for a visit to the city, or for a journey.

The sheriff was obliged to force him into the office.

The wolf from the coast was frightened and abashed.

He advanced, balancing himself first on one leg, then on the other, with that irregular walk of the sailor, who, missing the rolling and tossing of the ocean, is surprised to find beneath his feet anything so immovable as *terra firma*.

To give himself confidence, he fumbled over his soft felt hat, adorned with little lead saints, after the fashion of King Louis XI, of illustrious memory, and adorned still more with a round *gances de laine*, made by some young country girl, in the primitive style of four or five pins placed in a bit of cork.

Daburon examined him, and saw his worth at a glance.

There was no doubt but what this was the red-faced man described by one of the witnesses from Jonchère.

It was impossible also to doubt the honesty of the man. His face breathed open-heartedness and goodness.

"Your name ?" demanded the judge of inquiry.

"Marie Pierre Lerouge."

" You are, then, some relation of Claudine Lerouge ? "

" Her husband, monsieur."

What, the husband of the victim, alive, and the police ignorant of even his existence !

That was Daburon's first thought.

What, then, does this wonderful progress in invention accomplish ?

To-day, precisely as twenty years ago, when the law is in doubt, it requires the same inordinate loss of time and money to obtain the slightest information.

On Friday, they had written to inquire about Claudine's past life ; it was now Monday, and no reply had arrived.

And yet photography was in existence, and the telegraph. They had at their service a thousand means, formerly unknown ; and they made no use of them.

" All the world," said the judge, " believed her a widow. She herself pretended to be one."

" Yes ; it was an arrangement between ourselves. I told her that I would have nothing more to do with her."

" Indeed ? Well, you know, I suppose, that she is dead —that she was the victim of a dreadful crime ? "

" The officer who brought me here told me of it, monsieur," replied the sailor, his face darkening. " She was a wretch ! " he added in a deep tone.

" How ? You, her husband, revile her ? "

" I have good reason to, monsieur. Ah, my dead father, who foresaw it all at the time, warned me ! I laughed when he said, ' Take care, or she will dishonour you.' He was right. For her sake, I have been hunted down by the police, just like some skulking thief. Everywhere that they have inquired after me with a description, people will say, ' Ah-ha, he has committed some crime ! ' And here I am before a court of justice ! Ah, monsieur, what a disgrace ! The Lerouges have been honest people, from father to son, since the world began. Inquire through the country. They will tell you, ' Lerouge's word is as good as another man's writing.' Yes, she was a wicked woman ; and I have often told her that she would come to a bad end."

" You told her that ? "

" More than a hundred times, monsieur."

" Why ? Come, my friend, be assured ; your honour is not at stake here : no one doubts you. When did you warn her so wisely ? "

" Ah, a long time ago, monsieur," replied the sailor ; " the first time was more than thirty years back. She had ambition in her very blood ; she wished to mix herself in the intrigues of the great. It was that that ruined her. She said that you got money for preserving their secrets ; and I said that you got disgrace along with it. To put up your hands to hide the sins of the rich, and to expect happiness from it is like making your bed of thorns, in the hope of sleeping well. But she had got it into her head ; and it couldn't be got out."

" You were her husband." objected Daburon ; " you had the right to command her obedience."

The sailor struck his head, and heaved a deep sigh.

" Alas, monsieur, it was I who did the obeying ! "

To proceed by short inquiries with a witness, when you have no idea of the information he brings, is but to lose time in attempting to gain it. When you think you are approaching the important fact, you may be just avoiding it. It is much better to give the witness the rein, and to listen, putting him on the track only when he gets too far away. It is the surest and easiest method. This was the course Daburon pursued, all the time cursing Gevrol's absence, as he by a single word could have cut off a good half of the examination, whose importance, by the way, the judge did not even suspect.

" In what intrigues did your wife mingle ? " asked the magistrate. " Go on, my friend, tell me exactly ; here, you know, we must have not only the truth, but the whole truth."

Lerouge placed his hat on a chair. Then he began alternately to twirl his fingers and snap them, and to scratch his head violently. It was his way of arranging his ideas.

" I must tell you," he began, " that it is thirty-five years since I fell in love with Claudine, at St. Jean. She was a bright, neat, fascinating girl, with a voice sweeter than honey. She was the most beautiful girl in the country, straight as a mast, supple as a willow, as fine and strong as a ship of the line. Her eyes sparkled like old cider. She had black hair, white teeth, and her breath was sweeter than the sea-breeze. The difficulty was, that she hadn't a sou, while our family was in easy circumstances. Her mother, who had been a widow for some thirty-six years, was not, saving your presence, much respected ; and my father was the honestest man alive. When I spoke to the old fellow of

marrying Claudine, he swore fiercely ; and a week after he sent me to Porto on a schooner belonging to one of our neighbours, pretending that it was for change of air. I came back, at the end of six months, thinner than a marlinspike, but more in love than ever. Recollections of Claudine scorched me like a fire. I was fool enough to give up eating and drinking. I felt that she loved me a little in return, seeing that I was a stout young fellow, and more than one girl had set her cap for me. Then my father, seeing that he could do nothing, that I was wasting away without saying ' boo ! ' and was in a fair way to join my mother in the cemetery, decided to let me complete my folly. So one evening, after we had returned from fishing, and I got up from supper without tasting it, he said to me, ' Marry the hag, and stop this sort of thing.' I remember it distinctly ; because, at hearing the old fellow call my love such a name, I flew into a passion, and almost wanted to kill him. Ah, one never gains anything by marrying in opposition to one's parents ! "

The brave sailor wandered in the midst of his recollections. He was very far from his story.

The judge of inquiry attempted to bring him back into the right path.

" Let us come to our business," he said.

" I am going to, monsieur ; but it is necessary to begin at the beginning. I married. That evening, after the ceremony, and when the relatives and invited guests had departed, I went to join my wife, when I perceived my father all alone in one corner weeping. The sight touched my heart, and I had a foreboding of evil ; but it quickly passed away. It is so delightful, those first six months with a dearly loved wife ! You seem to be surrounded by mists, that change the very stones into palaces and temples so completely that novices are taken in. For two years, in spite of a few little quarrels, everything went on nicely. Claudine managed me like a charm. Ah, she was cunning ! She seized, bound, carried me to market, and sold me, while I was totally unconscious. Her great fault was her extravagance. All that I earned—and my business was very prosperous—she put on her back. Every week there was some new ornament, dresses, jewels, bonnets, the devil's baubles, which merchants invent for the perdition of the female sex. The neighbours chattered ; but I thought it was all right. At the baptism of our son, who was called

Jacques after my father, to please her, I spent, regardless of my usual economy, more than three hundred pistoles—the very sum with which I had intended buying a meadow that lay in the midst of our property."

Daburon was boiling over with impatience ; but what could he do ?

" Go on, go on," he said every time Lerouge made the slightest appearance of stopping.

" I was well enough pleased," continued the sailor, " until one morning I saw one of the Count de Commarin's servants entering our house, their château being only a quarter of a mile from our house on the other side of the town. There was something peculiar about this Germain that I didn't like at all. Then it was said that he had been mixed up in that affair of poor Thomassine, a young girl of our family who attended on the countess, and who one day suddenly disappeared. I asked my wife what the fellow wanted ; she replied that he had come to engage her services as wet nurse. I couldn't understand it ; for our means were sufficient to allow Claudine to keep all her milk for our own child. But she gave me the very best of reasons. She wanted to earn a little money, being ashamed of doing nothing, while I was killing myself with work. She wanted to save, to economise ; so that before long I might not be obliged to go to sea any more. She was to get such a good price that, in a very little while, we could save enough to replace the three hundred pistoles, and buy the meadow after all. That confounded meadow decided me."

" Did she not tell you of the commission with which she was charged ? "

This question astonished Lerouge. He thought that it was said very properly that the law sees and knows everything.

" Not then," he answered ; " but you shall see. A week after, the postman brought a letter, asking her to come to Paris to get the child. It arrived in the evening. ' Very well,' said she, ' I will start to-morrow by the stage-coach.' I didn't say a word then ; but next morning, when she was about to take her seat in the coach, I declared that I was going with her. She didn't seem at all angry. On the contrary, she seemed pleased ; at which, of course, I was delighted. At Paris, she was to get the little one at Madame Gerdy's, who lived on the Boulevard. We arranged that she was to go alone, while I waited for her at our inn. After

she had gone, I grew jealous. I went out in about an hour, and prowled about Madame Gerdy's house, making inquiries of the servants and of the passers-by, until I discovered that she was the mistress of the Count de Commarin. Of course, I was in a passion ; and, if I had been master, my wife should have gone back without the little scamp. A nice sort of thing to be mixed up in, to be sure, I thought."

The judge of inquiry moved uneasily in his chair. " Will this man never end ? " he muttered.

" Yes, you are perfectly right," he said ; " but never mind your thoughts. Go on, go on ! "

" Claudine, monsieur, was more obstinate than a mule. After three days of violent discussion, and by the wicked snares of kissing and embracing, she tore from me a reluctant consent. Then she told me that we were not to return home by coach. The lady, who feared the fatigue of the journey for her child, had arranged that we should carry him back by short stages in her carriage, and drawn by her horses. That was keeping up grand style. I was ass enough to be delighted, because it gave me a chance to see the country at my leisure. We were installed with the children, mine and the other, in an elegant carriage, drawn by magnificent animals, driven by a coachman in livery. My wife was mad with joy, and chinked the gold in my face. I was angry, as an honest husband should be who sees money in the family which he didn't earn. At seeing my countenance, Claudine, hoping to pacify me, resolved to tell me the whole truth. ' See here,' she said to me——"

Lerouge stopped, and, changing his tone, said :

" You understand that it is my wife who is speaking ? "

" Yes, yes. Go on."

" She said to me, shaking her purse, ' See here, my man, we shall never want again ; and here's the reason : the count, who has a legitimate child of the same age as this, wishes that this youngster shall bear his name instead of the other ; and this can only be accomplished through me. On the road, we are to meet at an inn, where we are to lodge, Germain and the nurse to whom they have entrusted the legitimate child. We are to be put in the same chamber ; and, during the night, I am to exchange the little ones, as they are very much alike, one for the other. The count is to give eight thousand francs for it, and an annuity of a thousand francs.' "

" And you," cried the judge, " you, who call yourself an honest man, permitted such a villainy, when one word would have been sufficient to prevent it ? "

" Excuse me, monsieur," remonstrated Lerouge. " If you would only let me finish."

" Well, go on."

" I could say nothing, then, I was so choked with rage. I was dismayed. But she burst out laughing—she was always afraid of me when I asserted myself—and said, ' What a fool you are ! Listen, before you sour like a dish of milk. The count is the only one who wants this change made ; and he is the one that's to pay for it. His mistress, this little one's mother, doesn't want it at all ; but she seems to consent, so as not to quarrel with her lover, and because she has got a plan of her own. She took me aside, during my visit in her room ; and, after having made me swear secrecy on a crucifix, she told me this plan. She said that she couldn't bear the idea of separating herself from her babe for ever, and of bringing up another's child ; so she said that, if I would agree not to change the children, keeping mum about it to the count, she would give me ten thousand francs down, and guarantee me an annuity equal to what the count was to give me. She declared, also, that she could easily find out whether I kept my word, as she had made a mark of recognition on her little one. She didn't show me the mark ; and I have examined him carefully, but can't find it. Do you understand now ? I am simply to take care of this little fellow here. I am to tell the count that I have made the exchange. We fill our pockets from both sides ; and our little Jacques will be a rich man. What do you think of your wife now ? Has she more cleverness than you, eh ? ' That, monsieur, is word for word what Claudine said to me."

The rough sailor drew from his pocket a large blue-checked handkerchief, and blew his nose so violently that the windows shook. It was his way of weeping.

Daburon was confounded.

Since the beginning of this wretched affair, he had encountered astonishment after astonishment. Scarcely had he got his ideas in order on any point when something new arose which utterly routed them again.

He felt confused. What was this new and grave information ? What did it mean ?

He longed to investigate it instantly ; but he saw that

Lerouge was getting on with difficulty, laboriously disentangling his memories, guided by a well-stretched thread, which the least interruption would break.

" What Claudine proposed to me," continued the sailor, " was villainous ; and I was an honest man. But she kneaded me to her will as easily as a baker kneads a *paté*. She overcame my heart ; she made me see things white as snow which were really as black as ink. How I loved her ! She proved to me that we were wronging no one, and that we were making little Jacques' fortune, and I was silenced. At evening we arrived at some village, and the coachman, stopping the carriage before an inn, told us we were to lodge there. We entered, and who do you think we saw ? That scamp, Germain, with a nurse, carrying a child so exactly like the one we had that I was startled. They had journeyed there, like ourselves, in one of the count's carriages. A suspicion came over me. How could I be sure that Claudine had not invented the second story to pacify me ? She was certainly capable of it. I was enraged. I would consent to the one wickedness, but not to the other. I resolved not to lose sight of our little chap, swearing that they shouldn't cheat me : so I kept him all the evening on my knees ; and, to make it the surer, I tied my handkerchief about his waist. Ah ! their plan was well laid. After supper they spoke of turning in ; and then it was found that there were only two rooms and two beds to spare in the house. It seemed as though it was built expressly for our scheme. The innkeeper said that the two nurses might sleep in one room and Germain and myself in the other. You understand, monsieur ? Add to this that during the entire evening I had surprised looks of intelligence passing between my wife and that rascally servant, and you can imagine how furious I was. It was conscience that spoke ; and I was trying to silence it. I knew very well that I was doing wrong ; and I almost wished myself dead. Why is it these scamps can almost twist an honest man's spirit around like a weather-cock with every breath of their rascality ? "

Daburon's only reply was a blow of his fist, almost powerful enough to break his desk.

Lerouge at that proceeded more quickly.

" As for me, I stopped the business, pretending to be too jealous to leave my wife a minute. Everything turned out as I wished. The other nurse went into the room first. Claudine

and I followed soon afterwards. My wife went to sleep in her clothes by the side of the other nurse and child. I installed myself in a chair near the bed, determined to keep one eye open, and to mount close watch. I put out the candle, in order to let the women sleep ; as for me, I could scarcely think. My ideas drove away sleep ; and I thought of my father, and what he would say, if he ever knew what I was doing. Towards midnight, I heard Claudine moving. I held my breath. She arose. Was she going to change the children ? At one moment, I thought not ; the next, I felt sure she was. I was beside myself ; and, seizing her by the arm, I commenced to beat her roughly, letting loose all that I had on my heart. I spoke in a loud voice, as on a ship in a high wind. I swore like a fiend. I raised a frightful disturbance. The other nurse cried out, as if she were having her throat cut. At this uproar, Germain rushed in with a lighted candle. The sight of him finished me. Not knowing what I was doing, I drew from my pocket a Spanish knife, which I always carried, and, seizing the cursed baby, I ran the blade across his arm, crying, ' This fellow at least can't be changed without my knowing it ; he is marked for life ! ' "

Lerouge could go on no further.

Great drops of sweat stood upon his forehead, and, flowing down his cheeks, lodged in the deep wrinkles of his face.

He panted ; and the stern glance from the judge oppressed him, harassed him, urging him on, just as the whip urges on the negro overcome with fatigue.

" The wound on the little fellow," he continued, " was terrible. It bled dreadfully ; and he might have died ; but I didn't stop at that. I was troubled about the future, about what might happen afterwards ; so I determined to write out all that had occurred, and to have all sign it. This was done : we all four signed. Germain didn't dare resist ; for I spoke with knife in hand. He wrote his name first, begging me only to say nothing about it to the count, swearing that, for his part, he would never breathe a word of it, and pledging the other nurse to a like secrecy."

" And have you kept this paper ? " asked Daburon.

" Yes, monsieur ; and, as the officer, to whom I confessed all, advised me to bring it with me, I went to the place where I always kept it ; and I have it here."

" Give it to me."

Lerouge took from the pocket of his roundabout an old parchment pocket-book, fastened with a leather strap, and drew out a paper yellowed by age and careful hiding.

" Here it is," he said. " The paper hasn't been opened since that cursed night."

As the judge unfolded it, ashes fell out, which had been used to keep the writing, when wet, from blotting.

It was really a brief description of the scene described by the old sailor. The four signatures were all there.

" What has become of the witnesses who signed this paper ? " muttered the judge, speaking to himself.

Lerouge thought the question was put to him.

" Germain is dead," he replied ; " I have been told that he was killed in some broil or other. Claudine has been murdered ; but the other nurse still lives. She told the affair to her husband, I know ; for he hinted as much to me. Her name is Brossette ; and she lives in the village of Commarin itself."

" Is there anything else ? " asked the judge, after having taken down the name and address of this woman.

" The next day, monsieur, Claudine tried to pacify me, and to extort a promise of silence. The child was hardly sick at all ; but he kept an enormous scar on his arm."

" Was Madame Gerdy kept in ignorance of what had passed ? "

" I do not think so, monsieur ; but I am not sure."

" How ? not sure ? "

" Yes, monsieur. You see my ignorance came of what happened afterwards."

" What did happen ? "

The sailor hesitated.

" That, monsieur, concerns only me and——"

" My friend," interrupted the judge, " you are an honest man, I believe ; in fact, I am sure. But once in your life, influenced by a wicked woman, you did wrong—you became an accomplice in a very great crime. Repair that error, by speaking truly now. All that is said here, and which is not directly connected with the crime, remains secret ; even I will forget it immediately. Fear nothing ; and, if you experience some humiliation, remember it is your punishment for the past."

" Alas, monsieur," answered the sailor, " I have been already punished ; it is a long time since my trouble began.

Money, wickedly acquired, brings no good. On arriving home, I bought the wretched meadow for much more than it was worth ; and the day I walked over it, feeling that it was actually mine, closed my happiness. Claudine was a coquette ; but she had vices still worse. When she realised how much money we had, these vices burst forth, just as a fire smouldering at the bottom of the hold bursts forth when you open the hatches. Instead of the slight eater she had been, her appetite got to be enormous enough, saving your presence, to strike you with horror. There was feasting in our house without end. When I would go to sea, she would entertain the worst scoundrels in the country ; and there was nothing too good or too expensive for them. She took to drinking, too ; so that she was half her time far from sober. One night when she thought me at Rouen, I unexpectedly returned, I entered, and found her with the head bailiff of the town. I might have killed him, like the vermin that he was ; it was my right ; but I had pity on him. I took him by the neck and pitched him out the window, without opening it. It didn't kill him, more's the pity ! Then I fell upon my wife, and beat her until she couldn't stir."

Lerouge spoke in a harsh voice, now and then thrusting his restless hands into his eyes.

" I pardoned her," he continued ; " and the man who beats his wife and then pardons her is lost. In the future, she only takes better precautions—becomes more of a hypocrite. In the meanwhile, Madame Gerdy had taken back her child ; and Claudine had nothing more to restrain her. Protected and counselled by her mother, whom she had taken to live with us and who took care of our Jacques, she managed to deceive me for more than a year. I thought she had recovered her better senses ; but not at all : she lived a terrible life. My house became the resort of all the good-for-nothing rogues in the country, for whom my wife brought out bottles of wine and brandy ; and, while I was away at sea, they got drunk promiscuously. When money failed, she wrote to the count or his mistress ; and the orgies continued. Occasionally I had doubts which disturbed me ; and then without reason, for a simple yes or no, I would beat her until she was even more thirsty, and after that pardon like a coward, like an imbecile. It was a hard life. I don't know which gave me the most pleasure, embracing her or beating her. Everybody in the village

despised me, and turned their backs on me ; they believed me an accomplice or a willing dupe. I heard, afterwards, that they believed I shared the profits of my wife's conduct ; while in reality there were no profits. At all events, they wondered where all the money came from that was spent in my house. To distinguish me from a cousin of mine, also named Lerouge, they tacked on an infamous word to my name. What disgrace ! And I knew nothing of all the scandal—no, nothing. Would that I had never married ! Fortunately, though, my father was dead."

Daburon pitied him sincerely.

" Rest yourself, my friend," he said ; " wait an instant."

" No," replied the sailor, " I would rather get through with it quickly. One man, the priest, had the charity to tell me of it. Never had such a thing happened to a Lerouge ! Without losing a moment, I sought a lawyer, and asked him how an honest man ought to act who had had the misfortune to marry such a woman. He said that nothing could be done. To go to law was simply to publish one's own dishonour ; while a separation would accomplish nothing. When once a man has given his name to a woman, he told me, he could no longer take it back : he had shared it with her for the rest of her life ; she had the right to keep it. She may sully it, cover it with mire, drag it from wine-shop to wine-shop ; and the husband can do nothing. That being the case, my course was soon taken. That same day I sold the meadow and sent the money I got to Claudine, wishing to keep nothing of the price of shame. I then drew up a paper, authorising her to use our property, but not allowing her either to sell or mortgage it. Then I wrote a letter to her, in which I told her that she need never expect to speak with me again ; that I was nothing more to her, and that she might look upon herself as a widow : and that night I went away with my son."

" And what became of your wife after your departure ? "

" I cannot say, monsieur ; I only know that she quitted the country a year after I did."

" You have never seen her since ? "

" Never."

" But you were at her house three days before this crime was committed."

" That is true, monsieur ; but that was absolutely necessary. I had been at much trouble to find her : no one

knew what had become of her. Fortunately my notary was able to procure Madame Gerdy's address. He wrote to her ; and that is how I knew that Claudine was living at Jonchère. I had just come from Rouen. Captain Gervaise, who is a friend of mine, offered to bring me to Paris on his boat ; and I accepted. Ah, monsieur, what a shock I experienced when I entered her house ! My wife did not know me ! By constantly telling the world that I was dead, she had without a doubt ended by believing it herself. When I told my name, she fell back. The wretched woman had not changed in the least ; she had by her side a glass and a bottle of brandy——"

" All this doesn't explain why you were seeking your wife."

" It was on Jacques' account, monsieur, that I went. The little boy has grown to be a man ; and he is anxious to marry. For that, his mother's consent is necessary ; and I was taking to Claudine a paper, which the notary had drawn up, and which she signed. Here it is now."

Daburon took the paper, and appeared to read it attentively. After a moment he asked :

" Have you tried to think who could have killed your wife ? "

Lerouge made no reply.

" Have you had suspicions of anyone ? " persisted the judge.

" Well, monsieur," replied the sailor, " what can I say ? It might be that Claudine had wearied out these people from whom she drew money, like water from a well ; or perhaps, getting drunk some day, she blabbed too freely."

The testimony being as full as possible, Daburon discharged Lerouge, at the same time advising him to wait for Gevrol, who would take him to a hotel, where he might wait, at the disposal of justice, until further orders.

" All your expenses will be repaid you," added the judge.

Lerouge had scarcely turned on his heel, when an event —grave, extraordinary, unheard of, unprecedented—took place in the office of the judge of inquiry.

Constant, the serious, impassive, immovable, deaf and dumb Constant, arose and spoke.

He broke a silence of fifteen years. He forgot himself so far as to offer an opinion. He said :

" This, monsieur, is a most extraordinary affair."

Very extraordinary, truly, thought Daburon, putting to rout all predictions, all preconceived opinions.

Why had he, the judge, moved with such deplorable haste ? Why, before risking anything, had he not waited to possess all the elements of this weighty matter, to hold all the threads of this complicated plot ?

Justice is accused of slowness ; but it is this very slowness that constitutes its strength and surety, its almost infallibility.

One cannot know, on the instant, what course the testimony will take.

There is no knowing what facts investigations apparently useless may reveal.

The dramas of the court of assize lose much by not observing the unities.

When the labyrinth of the various passions and motives seems inextricable, an unknown personage presents himself, coming from no one knows where, and it is he who brings on the dénouement.

Daburon, usually the most prudent of men, had considered as simple one of the most complex cases he had ever come across. He had acted in a mysterious crime, which demanded the utmost caution, as carelessly as though it were a case of simple misdemeanour. Why ? Because his memory has not left free his deliberation, his judgment, his discernment. He had feared equally appearing weak and appearing revengeful. Thinking himself sure of his facts, he had been carried away by his animosity. And yet how often had he deceived himself with the idea of duty ! But, then, when you are at all doubtful about your duty, you are always on a false track.

The singular part of it all was, that his faults sprang from his very honesty. He had been led astray by a too great refinement of conscience. The scruples which troubled him had filled his mind with phantoms, had pushed him even to a passionate animosity.

Calmer now, he examined the matter more soundly. As a whole, thank heaven ! there was nothing done which could not be repaired. He accused himself, however, none the less hardly. Chance alone had stopped him. On the instant, he resolved that this examination should be his last. His profession henceforth could inspire him only with an unconquerable loathing. Then his interview with Claire had opened all the old wounds in his heart, and they bled

more dreadfully than ever. He felt, in despair, that his life was broken, ruined. A man may feel so, when all women are as nothing to him except one, whom he may never hope to possess.

Too religious to think of suicide, he asked himself with anguish what would become of him when he should throw aside his judge's robes.

Then he turned again to the business in hand. In any case, innocent or guilty, Albert was really the Viscount de Commarin, the count's legitimate son. But was he guilty ? Plainly not.

" I think," he cried out suddenly, " I had better speak to the Count de Commarin. Constant, send to his house and bring him here at once ; if he is not at home, have him sought for."

Daburon felt that an unpleasant duty was before him. He should have to say to the old gentleman, " Monsieur, I was mistaken about your legitimate son ; you have still the right one with you." What a position, not only painful, but bordering on the ridiculous ! As a compensation, though, he could tell him that Albert was innocent.

To Noel he must also tell the truth, must hurl him to earth, after having raised him among the clouds. What a blow it would be ! But, without a doubt, the count would make him some compensation ; at least, he ought to.

" Now," muttered the judge, " who can be the criminal ? "

A dark suspicion flashed across his brain, which immediately after appeared to him utterly absurd. He rejected it, then thought of it again. He turned and returned it, examined it in all its various aspects. He was almost decided, when M. de Commarin entered.

Daburon's messenger had arrived just as he was alighting from his carriage, on returning with Claire from Madame Gerdy's.

CHAPTER XVIII

Père Tabaret had spoken ; but he had also acted.

Abandoned by the judge of inquiry to his own resources, he went to work without losing a moment's time, and without taking a moment's rest.

The story of the cabriolet, drawn by a swift horse, was exact in every particular.

Lavish with his money, the old fellow had gathered together a dozen detectives on leave, or out of work ; and at the head of these worthy assistants, seconded by his friend Lecoq, he had gone to Bougival.

He had actually searched the country house by house, with the obstinacy and the patience of a maniac hunting for a needle in a haystack.

His efforts were not absolutely wasted.

After three days' investigation, he felt comparatively sure of this ; the assassin had not left the cars at Rueil, as all the people of Bougival, Jonchère, and Marly do, but had gone on as far as Chatou.

Tabaret thought he recognised him in a man, described to him by the employés at that station as still young, of brown complexion, with a pair of black whiskers, laden with a great coat and an umbrella.

This traveller, who arrived by the train which left Paris for St. Germain at thirty-five minutes past eight in the evening, had appeared very depressed.

On quitting the station, he had started off at a rapid pace on the road which led to Bougival. Upon the way, two men from Marly and a woman from Malmaison had noticed him, and wondered at his long strides. He smoked all the way.

On crossing the bridge which joins the two banks of the Seine at Bougival, he had been again noticed.

It is usual to pay a toll on crossing this bridge ; and the supposed murderer had apparently forgotten this circumstance.

He had passed without paying, keeping up his rapid pace, pressing his elbows to his side, husbanding his breath ; and the gate-keeper was obliged to rush after him for his pay.

He appeared much provoked at this circumstance, threw down a ten sous' piece, and went on, without waiting for the forty-five centimes due him as change.

Nor was that all.

The station agent at Rueil remembered that, two minutes before the quarter-past ten train passed, a traveller arrived agitated, and so out of breath that he could scarcely ask for a ticket—a second-class ticket—for Paris.

The appearance of this man corresponded exactly to the

description given of him by his employés, at Chatou, and by the gate-keeper at the bridge.

Finally the old man got on the track of an individual who had occupied the same compartment with him.

He proved to be a baker of Asnières ; and he had written to him, asking an interview.

Such was Père Tabaret's work-sheet, when on Monday morning he presented himself at the Palais de Justice, in order to hear if there had been any information received as to the Widow Lerouge's past life.

He found that none had arrived ; but in the gallery he met Gevrol and his man.

The chief of detectives was triumphant, and showed it, too. On seeing Tabaret, he called out :

" Ah, well, my illustrious bird's-nest hunter, what news ? Have you found any more mares' nests since the other day ? Ah, you old rogue, you are aiming for my place ! "

The old man was sadly changed.

The consciousness of his mistake made him humble and meek. These pleasantries, which a few days before would have made him angry, now did not touch him. Instead of replying, he bowed his head in such a penitent manner that Gevrol was astonished.

" Jeer at me, my good Gevrol," he replied, " mock me without pity. You are right ; I deserve it all."

" Ah," said the chief, " you have performed some new masterpiece, my ardent old fellow ! "

Père Tabaret shook his head sadly.

" I have delivered up an innocent man," he said ; " and justice will not give him back to me."

Gevrol was delighted, and rubbed his hands until he almost wore away the skin.

" This is fine," he sang out, " this is capital. To bring criminals to justice is of no account at all ; but to free the innocent, Jove ! that is the last touch of art. Papa Tirauclair, you are a wonder ; and I bow before you."

At the same time, he lifted his hat ironically.

" Don't crush me," replied the old fellow. " As you know, in spite of my grey hairs, I am young in the profession. Because chance has served me three or four times I had become foolishly proud. I learned too late that I was not all that I had thought myself. I was but an apprentice, and success had turned my head ; while you, Gevrol, you

were always my master. In the place of laughing, pray help me, aid me with your counsels and your experience. Alone, I can do nothing as well as if I had your assistance."

Gevrol was elated in the highest degree.

Tabaret's submission, which he really thought a great deal of at heart, tickled his pretensions as a detective immensely.

He was softened.

"I suppose," he said patronisingly, "you refer to the Jonchère matter?"

"Alas! yes, dear Gevrol, I wished to go on without you; but I have been dished."

Tabaret's old cunning kept his countenance as penitent as that of a sacristan surprised while cooking meat on Friday; but at heart he was laughing and rejoicing all the while.

"Conceited fool!" he thought, "I will flatter you so that you will end by doing just what I want you to."

Gevrol rubbed his nose, put out his lower lip, and said, "Ah—hem!"

He pretended to hesitate; but it was only because he enjoyed prolonging the old amateur's discomfiture.

"Come," said he at last, "cheer up, Papa Tirauclair. I am a good fellow at heart; and I'll give you a lift. It is kind in me, isn't it? But, to-day, I am entirely too busy. I am expected below now. Come to me to-morrow morning, and we'll talk it over. But before we part I'll give you a light to find your way with. Do you know who this witness is that I have brought?"

"No; but tell me, my good Gevrol."

"Well, that fellow on the bench there, who is waiting for M. Daburon, is the husband of the victim of the Jonchère tragedy!"

"It is impossible," said Père Tabaret, stunned. Then, after reflecting, he added, "You are joking with me."

"No, upon my word. Go, ask him his name; he will tell you that he is called Marie Lerouge."

"She wasn't a widow, then?"

"It appears not," replied Gevrol sarcastically, "since there is her happy spouse."

"Whew!" muttered the old fellow. "And does he bring any information?"

In a few sentences the chief explained to his amateur colleague the story that Lerouge was about to give to the judge of inquiry.

" What do you say to that ? " he demanded at the end.

" What do I say to that ? " stammered Père Tabaret, whose countenance indicated intense astonishment, " what do I say to that ? I don't say anything. But I think—no, I don't think at all ! "

" A tile has fallen, eh, what ? " said Gevrol, beaming.

" Say rather a blow of a club," replied Tabaret.

But suddenly he recovered himself, giving his forehead a hard blow with his fist.

" And my baker ! " he cried. " To-morrow, then, Gevrol."

" He is crazed," thought the chief of detectives.

The old fellow was sane enough ; but he had entirely forgotten the Asnières baker, whom he had appointed to meet at his house. He might find him there still.

On the stairway he met Daburon ; but he hardly deigned to reply to him.

He was soon out, and trotting like a lean cat along the quays.

" There ; we'll fix it all right," he said to himself. " Noel may feel bad ; but he shan't suffer. Pshaw ! if he likes, I'll adopt him. Tabaret doesn't sound so well as Commarin, but it's at least a name. No matter. Gevrol's story affects in no way Albert's situation nor my convictions. He is the legitimate son ; so much the better for him. That doesn't in any way prove his innocence, though, unless I am mistaken. He evidently knows nothing of these surprising circumstances, any more than his father. He must believe, as well as the count, in the substitution having taken place. Madame Gerdy, too, must have been ignorant of these facts ; they must have invented some story to explain the scar. But then she must have known that Noel was really her son ; for she had placed a mark of recognition upon him, which she, of course, examined when he was returned to her. Then, when Noel discovered the count's letters, she must have hastened to explain to him——"

Père Tabaret stopped as suddenly as if his path were obstructed by a dangerous reptile.

He was terrified at the conclusion he had reached.

" Noel, then, must be the murderer of the Widow Lerouge, that he might prevent her confessing that the substitution never took place ; and he burnt the letters and papers which proved it ! "

But he pushed away with horror this supposition, as every

honest man drives away a detestable thought which by accident gets into his mind.

" What an old fool I am ! " he exclaimed, resuming his walk. " This is the result of the dreadful profession I used to glory in following. Suspect Noel, my boy, my sole heir, the personification of virtue and honour—Noel, whom ten years of constant intercourse have taught me to esteem and admire to such a degree that I would speak for him as I would for myself? Men of his class must have terrible passions to push them to shedding blood : and I have never known Noel to have but two passions—his mother and his profession. And I dare even to breathe a suspicion against this noble character ! I ought to be whipped. Old fool ! isn't the lesson you have already received sufficiently terrible ? Will you never be more cautious ? "

Thus he reasoned, forcing himself to repel these disquieting thoughts, and restraining his habits of investigation ; but in his heart a tormenting voice constantly whispered, " Could it be Noel ? "

Père Tabaret arrived at the Rue St. Lazare. Before his door stood an elegant blue coupé, drawn by a magnificent horse. Mechanically he stopped.

" A handsome animal ! " he said. " My lodgers must be receiving some fine callers."

They were apparently receiving very bad ones, too ; for at that moment he saw Clergeot coming out, honest Clergeot, whose presence in a house betrayed ruin just as surely as the presence of undertakers indicate death.

The old detective, who knew everybody, was well acquainted with the honest banker. He had even had business with him once, examining his books.

He stopped him.

" Halloa ! you old crocodile," said he ; " you have business, then, in my house ? "

" So it seems," replied Clergeot dryly, not liking to be treated with such familiarity.

" Hold on ! " shouted Père Tabaret.

And, urged by the very natural curiosity of a proprietor very careful about the kind of lodgers he takes, he added :

" Who the devil are you ruining now ? "

" I never ruin anyone," replied Clergeot, with an air of offended dignity. " Have you ever had reason to complain of me in our affairs ? I think not. Ask the young advocate up

there, who does business with me, if you like ; he will tell you whether he has reason to regret knowing me."

Tabaret was painfully impressed.

What, Noel, the prudent Noel, one of Clergeot's customers ! What could that mean ? Perhaps there was no harm in it ; but he remembered the fifteen thousand francs of Thursday.

" Yes," said he, wishing to get a little more information, " I know that young Gerdy spends a pretty round sum."

Clergeot was always sensitive, and never left his profession undefended when attacked.

" It isn't he personally," he objected, " who makes the money dance ; it's that charming little girl of his. Ah, she's a great one ; she'd eat the devil—hoofs, horns, and all ! "

What, a mistress—a creature whom Clergeot himself, fond of the little girls, considered expensive ! This revelation, at this time, pierced the old man to the heart. But he dissembled. A gesture, a look, might awaken the usurer's defiance, and close his mouth.

" That's well known," he replied, in as careless a tone as he could muster ; " youth must have something to amuse itself with. But what do you suppose that this little girl costs him a year ? "

" Oh, I don't know ! He is wrong in not limiting her. According to my calculation, she must have, during the four years that he has had her, cost him in the neighbourhood of five hundred thousand francs."

Four years ? Five hundred thousand francs !

These words, these figures, burst like a bombshell on Tabaret's brain.

A half million !

In that case, Noel must be utterly ruined. But then——

" It is a great deal," said he, succeeding by desperate efforts in hiding his sufferings ; " it is enormous ; but, then, Gerdy has resources."

" He ? " interrupted the usurer, shrugging his shoulders. " Not a bit of it," he added, snapping his fingers ; " he is utterly ruined. But, if he owes you money, never fear. He is a sly dog ; he is going to get married. I have just renewed his notes for twenty-six thousand francs, on that understanding. *Au revoir*, M. Tabaret."

The usurer hurried away, leaving the poor old fellow standing still as a stone in the street.

He experienced something of that terrible grief which breaks a father's heart when he begins to realise that his dearly loved son is perhaps the worst of scoundrels.

And, moreover, such was his confidence in Noel that he struggled with his reason to resist again the suspicion which tormented him. Might not this usurer be slandering the advocate ?

People who demand more than ten per cent. are capable of anything. Evidently he had exaggerated the extent of Noel's follies.

And, even if it were true, have not many men done just such insane things for women, without ceasing to be honest ?

He was about entering his door.

A whirlwind of silk, lace, and velvet barred the passage.

A bright young brunette was coming out.

She jumped as lightly as a bird into the blue coupé.

Père Tabaret was a gallant man, and the young girl was most charming ; but he never even glanced at her.

He entered ; and beneath the arch he found his porter standing, cap in hand, looking tenderly with his one eye at a twenty-franc piece.

" Ah, monsieur," said the man, " such a fine lady, so ladylike ! If you had only been here five minutes sooner."

" What lady ? Why ? "

" This fine lady, who just went out, monsieur, she came to inquire about M. Gerdy. She gave me twenty francs for answering her questions. It seems that monsieur is going to be married ; and she was evidently much excited at it. Superb creature ! I know now why he is out every night."

" M. Gerdy ? "

" Yes, monsieur ; but I have never spoken to you of it, because he seemed to hide it. He never asked me to open for him : no, he wasn't such a fool. He slipped out by the little back gate. I said to myself, ' He don't want to disturb me. It is very thoughtful on his part ; and he seems to enjoy it so.' "

The porter spoke with his eye constantly fixed on the gold piece.

When he raised his head to examine the countenance of his master, Tabaret had disappeared.

" There is another fine fellow ! " said the porter to himself. " A hundred sous that master runs after the superb

creature. Run ahead ; go it, old greybeard." The porter was right. Père Tabaret did run after the lady in the blue coupé.

He thought, " She will tell me all " ; and instantly he was in the street.

He reached it just in time to see the blue coupé turn the corner of the Rue St. Lazare.

" Heavens ! " he muttered, " I shall lose sight of her, just when the truth is in my grasp."

He was in one of those states of nervous excitement which call forth prodigies.

He ran to the end of the Rue St. Lazare as rapidly as if he had been a young man of twenty.

Joy ! Five steps from him he saw the blue coupé in the Rue Havre, stopped in the midst of a blockade of carriages.

" I have her," he murmured.

He looked all through the neighbourhood of the Ouest, that street where unemployed carriages are almost invariably roving ; not a carriage !

Gladly would he have cried, like Richard III :

" My kingdom for a hackney coach."

The blue coupé got out of the entanglement, and started off rapidly towards the Rue Tronchet. The old fellow followed after.

He kept his ground. The coupé gained but little upon him.

While he was running in the middle of the road, keeping an eye out for a carriage, he kept saying :

" Follow on, old fellow, follow on. If you haven't a head, you must use your legs. Why didn't you remember to get this woman's address from Clergeot ? You must be sharper than that, my old friend, sharper than that !

" If you want to be a detective, you must be fit for the profession ; and every detective ought to have the shanks of a deer."

He thought only of catching up with the blue coupé and of nothing else. But he was losing ground—plainly losing ground.

He was only half-way down the Rue Tronchet, and he broke down. He felt that his limbs could not carry him a hundred steps farther ; and the cursed coupé had reached the Madeleine.

Hurrah ! a covered hack, going in the same direction with himself, passed by.

He made a sign more despairing than a drowning man's. The sign was seen. He gathered together his last strength, and with a bound jumped up into the vehicle without the aid of the step.

" There," he gasped, " that blue coupé ; twenty francs."

" All right," replied the coachman, nodding.

And he covered his ill-conditioned horse with vigorous blows, muttering :

" A jealous husband following his wife ; that's evident. Hi, you rascal ! "

As for Père Tabaret, he was a long time in recovering himself, his strength was so completely exhausted.

For nearly a minute, he could not catch his breath. They were soon upon the boulevard. He stood up in the carriage, supporting himself by the driver's seat.

" I don't see the coupé any longer," he said.

" Oh, I see it plainly ! But it is drawn by a splendid horse ! "

" Yours ought to be a better one. I said twenty francs ; I'll make it forty."

The driver whipped up unpityingly, and growled :

" There is no use talking, I must catch her. For twenty francs, I would have let her escape ; for I love the girls, and always help them if I can. But, gracious ! Two louis ! I wonder how a man who is as ugly as that can be jealous."

Père Tabaret tried every way to occupy his mind with less important matters.

He tried not to reflect, wishing first to see this woman, speak with her, and carefully question her.

He was sure that by one word she would destroy or save her lover.

" What, destroy Noel ? Ah, well, yes."

This idea of Noel as the assassin, harassed, tormented, pestered his brain, like the moth which, coming over and over again, wounds itself at last against the glass, or burns in the flame.

As they passed Chausée d'Antin, the blue coupé was scarcely thirty paces in advance. The driver of the hack turned, and said :

" The coupé has stopped."

" Then stop also. Don't lose sight of it ; but be ready to start again at the same time it does."

Père Tabaret leaned as far as he could out of the hack.

The young girl got out, crossed the pavement, and entered a shop where cashmere and laces were sold.

" There," thought Père Tabaret, " is where the thousand-franc notes go ! Half a million in four years ! What can these creatures do with the money so lavishly poured upon them ? Do they eat it ? On what caprices do they squander their fortunes ? They are the devil's own love potions, given to these idiots to drink, making them ruin themselves for them. They must possess some peculiar art of preparing and spicing pleasure ; since, once they get hold of a man, he sacrifices everything before leaving them."

The hack moved on once more, but soon stopped again.

The coupé made a new pause, this time before a curiosity shop.

" The woman wants to buy out all Paris ! " said the old fellow to himself in a passion. " Yes, if Noel committed the crime, it was she who pushed him on. These are my fifteen thousand francs that she is frittering away now. How long will they last her ? It must have been for money, then, that Noel murdered this Lerouge woman. He must be the lowest, most infamous of men ! What a monster of dissimulation and hypocrisy ! And to think that he would be my heir, if I should die here in my rage ! Yes, it is written in so many words, ' I leave to my son, Noel Gerdy ! ' If this boy is guilty, there isn't a punishment sufficiently great for him. I wonder if this woman is never going home ! "

" This woman " was in no hurry. The day was charming, her toilette irresistible ; and she intended showing herself off. She visited three or four more stores, and at last stopped at a confectioner's, where she remained for more than quarter of an hour.

The old fellow, driven to distraction, jumped and stamped in his hack.

It was torture thus to be kept from the key to a terrible enigma by the caprice of a worthless hussy ! He was dying to follow her, take her by the arm, and cry out to her :

" Home, wretched creature, home at once ! What are you doing here ? Don't you know that at this moment your lover, he whom you have ruined, is suspected of murder ? Home, then, that I may question you, that I may learn from you whether he is innocent or guilty ; for you can tell me, without a doubt, and I have prepared a fine trap to catch you with. Home ! this anxiety is killing me ! "

She returned to her carriage.

It moved on, passed up the Faubourg Montmartre, turned into the Rue Provence, deposited its fair freight at her own door, and drove away.

" She lives here," said Père Tabaret, with a sigh of relief.

He got off the hack, gave the driver his two louis, bade him wait, and followed the young girl's footsteps.

" The old fellow is patient," thought the driver ; " but the little brunette is a sly one."

The old detective opened the door of the porter's lodge.

" What is the name of the lady who has just entered ? " he demanded.

The porter did not seem disposed to reply.

" Her name ! " insisted the old man.

The tone was so short, so imperative, that the old porter was upset.

" Madame Juliette Chaffour," he replied.

" On what floor ? "

" The second—the door opposite you."

A moment after, the old man was waiting in Madame Juliette's parlours. Madame was dressing, the chambermaid informed him, and would be down instantly.

Père Tabaret was astonished at the luxury of this parlour. There was nothing flaring, of course, or in bad taste. The old fellow, who knew a good deal about such things, saw that everything was of the costliest. The ornaments on the mantel alone must have cost, at the lowest estimation, twenty thousand francs.

" Clergeot," he said, " didn't exaggerate a bit."

Juliette's entrance disturbed his reflections.

She had taken off her dress, and had hastily thrown about her a black dressing-gown, trimmed with cherry satin. Her beautiful hair, slightly disordered after her drive, fell in cascades upon her neck, and was fastened behind her delicate ears. She dazzled Père Tabaret ; and yet he perfectly understood such follies.

" You wished to speak with me ? " she inquired, bending graciously.

" Madame," replied Père Tabaret, " I am a friend of Noel Gerdy's. I may say his best friend, and——"

" Pray sit down, monsieur," interrupted the lady.

She placed herself on a sofa, just showing the tips of her

little feet, encased in slippers matching the dress ; while the old man sat down in a chair.

" I come, madame," he began, " on very serious business. Your presence at M. Gerdy's house——"

" Ah," cried Juliette to herself, " he knows of my visit already ; he must be a detective."

" My dear child——" began Tabaret paternally.

" Oh, I know, monsieur, what your errand is. Noel has sent you to scold me. He is anxious to prevent my coming to his house. Well, I don't want to go ; but it's annoying to have a puzzle for a lover—a man whom nobody knows anything about, a riddle in a black coat and white cravat, a sad and mysterious being——"

" You have been imprudent."

" Why ? Because he is going to get married ? He has told you all about it, then ? "

" Suppose that that was not true."

" Oh, but it is ! He told that old shark Clergeot so, who told me. Anyway, he must be plotting something in that head of his ; for the last month he has been so fickle ; he has changed so that I hardly recognise him."

Père Tabaret was especially anxious to know whether Noel had prepared an alibi for the Tuesday of the crime. That for him was the grand question. If he had, he was certainly guilty ; if not, he might still be innocent. Madame Juliette, he had no doubt, could make that point perfectly clear.

Consequently he had come with his lesson all prepared, his little trap all set.

The young lady's outburst disconcerted him a little ; but he continued, trusting to the chances in conversation :

" Will you prevent Noel's marriage, then ? "

" His marriage ! " cried Juliette, bursting out into a laugh. " Ah, the poor boy ! If he meets no worse obstacle than myself, his path will be smooth. Let him marry, this dear Noel, the sooner the better, and let me hear no more of him."

" You don't love him, then ? " asked the old fellow, surprised at this amiable frankness.

" Listen, monsieur. I did love him intensely ; but that's all over now. For four years I have passed an intolerable existence—I, who am so fond of pleasure. If Noel doesn't leave me, I shall have to leave him. I am tired of having a lover who blushes for me and despises me."

" If he despises you, my dear, he scarcely shows it here,"

replied Père Tabaret, casting a significant glance about the room.

" You mean," said the girl, raising herself, " that he spends a great deal for me. It is true. He pretends that he has ruined himself for me ; it's very possible. But what's that to me ? I am not a hard-hearted woman ; and I would much prefer less money and more love. My follies have been inspired by anger and ennui. M. Gerdy treats me like a mercenary woman ; and so I act like one. We are quits."

" You know well that he worships you."

" He ? I tell you he is ashamed of me. He hides me like a secret crime. You are the first of his friends to whom I have ever spoken. Ask him if he has ever ridden out with me ? It would seem as though my very touch was dishonour. Why, no longer ago than last Tuesday, we went to the theatre ! He hired an entire box ; but do you think that he sat in it with me ? Not at all. He slipped away ; and I saw no more of him the whole evening."

" How ? Were you obliged to return home alone ? "

" No. At the end of the play, nearly midnight, he deigned to reappear. Then we went to the opera ball, where we took supper. Ah, that was charming ! But, at the ball, he didn't dare to let down his hood, or to take off his mask. At supper, I had to treat him like a perfect stranger, for fear of his friends."

This, then, was the alibi prepared in case of trouble.

Less wrapped up in her own passion, Juliette would have noticed Père Tabaret's looks, and would certainly have checked herself.

He was perfectly livid, and trembled like a leaf.

" Well," he said, making a superhuman effort to articulate his words, " the supper, I suppose, was none the less gay for that."

" Gay ! " repeated the girl, shrugging her shoulders ; " you would scarcely have known him. If you ever ask him to dinner, take good care how you allow him to drink. He made as merry over his wine as a drunken sailor. At the second bottle, he was as light-headed as a cork ; so much so that he lost everything he had—his coat, purse, umbrella, cigar-case——"

Père Tabaret hadn't strength enough to listen longer ; he jumped to his feet like a furious madman.

" Miserable wretch ! " he cried to himself. " Infamous scoundrel ! It is he ; but I have him."

And he rushed out, leaving Juliette so terrified that she called her maid.

" Child," said she, " I have made some dreadful blunder ; I have let some secret out. I know I have done wrong ; I feel it. That old fellow was no friend of Noel's. He came to circumvent me, to lead me by the nose ; and he has done it. Without a doubt, I have spoken against Noel. What could I have said ? I have thought carefully ; but I can remember nothing. He must be warned, though. I will write him a line, while you get a messenger."

Getting again into the hack, Père Tabaret hurried towards the préfecture of police. Noel an assassin ! His hate was now without bounds, as formerly had been his trusting love. He had been cruelly played with, unworthily duped by the vilest, most criminal of men. He thirsted for vengeance ; he tried to think of some punishment which was not too small for the crime.

" For he has not only murdered Claudine," thought he, " but he has so arranged the whole thing as to have an innocent man accused and condemned. And who knows that he did not kill his poor mother ? "

He regretted the abolition of torture, the refined cruelty of the Middle Ages—quartering, the stake, the wheel.

The guillotine was too quick ; the condemned man had scarcely time to feel the cold steel cutting through his muscles ; there is nothing but a single twitch of the neck. In trying to soften the pain of death, it had been made nowadays almost a pleasure.

The certainty of confronting Noel, of delivering him up to justice, of taking vengeance upon him, alone kept Tabaret up.

" It is clear," he muttered, " that the wretch forgot those things at the railway, in his haste to rejoin his mistress. Have they yet been called for ? If he has had the prudence to go boldly, and get them under a false name, I can see no further proofs against him. The testimony of this Madame Chaffour won't be on my side. The hussy, seeing her lover in danger, will deny what she has just told me : she will assert that Noel quitted her after ten o'clock. But he can't have dared to go to the railway again."

About the middle of the Rue Richelieu, Père Tabaret was taken with a sudden faintness.

" I am going to have an attack, I fear," thought he. " If I die, Noel will escape me, and will still be my heir. A man ought always to keep his will constantly with him, to destroy it if he wishes."

Twenty paces on, he saw a doctor's sign : he stopped the hack, and rushed into the house.

He was so excited, so beside himself, his eyes had such an expression of wildness, that the doctor was almost afraid of this remarkable patient, who cried to him hoarsely :

" Bleed me ! "

The doctor ventured an objection ; but already the old fellow had taken off his coat and drawn up one of his shirt-sleeves.

" Bleed me ! " he repeated. " Do you want me to die ? "

The doctor finally obeyed ; and Père Tabaret came out quieted and relieved.

An hour later, armed with the necessary power, and accompanied by a policeman, he proceeded to the lost property office at the railway, to make the necessary search.

His investigations resulted as he had expected.

He found that, on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, there had been found in one of the second-class compartments of train forty-five a great coat and an umbrella.

They showed him the articles ; and he recognised them as Noel's.

In one of the pockets of the great coat he found a pair of pearl grey gloves, torn and soiled, as well as a return ticket from Chatou, which had not been used.

In hurrying on, in pursuit of the truth, Père Tabaret knew only too well what this meant.

His conviction , unwillingly formed when Clergeot disclosed to him Noel's follies, had been since strengthened by a thousand circumstances. At Juliette's house he became positively sure ; and yet, at this last moment, when doubt became absolutely impossible, in seeing the evidence cleared up, he was depressed.

" On," he cried at last. " Now to arrest him."

And, without losing an instant, he hastened to the Palais de Justice, where he hoped to find the judge of inquiry.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, Daburon had not yet left his office.

He was conversing with the Count de Commarin, giving him the facts revealed by Pierre Lerouge, whom the count had believed dead many years since.

Père Tabaret entered like a whirlwind, too distracted to notice the presence of a stranger.

" Monsieur," he cried, stuttering with rage, " we have got the real assassin ! It is he, my adopted son, my heir, Noel ! "

"Noel ! " repeated Daburon, rising. And then, in a lower tone, he added, " I had suspected it."

" A warrant is necessary at once," continued the old detective. " If we lose a minute, he will slip through our fingers. He will know that he is discovered, if his mistress has time to warn him of my visit. Hasten, monsieur, hasten ! "

Daburon opened his lips to ask an explanation ; but the old detective continued :

" That is not yet all. An innocent man, Albert, is still in prison."

" He will not be so an hour longer," replied the magistrate. " A moment before your arrival, I had made arrangements to have him released. But about this other——"

Neither Père Tabaret nor Daburon had noticed the disappearance of the Count de Commarin.

At Noel's name he had gained the door quietly, and rushed into the gallery.

CHAPTER XIX

Noel had promised to use every effort—to attempt even the impossible—to obtain Albert's release.

He did interview some members of the bar, in fact, but managed to be repulsed everywhere.

At four o'clock, he called at the Count de Commarin's house, to inform the count of the slight success he had met.

" The count has gone out," said Denis ; " but if you will take the trouble to wait——"

" I will wait," answered Noel.

" Then," replied the valet, " will you please follow me ? I have the count's orders to take you into his study."

This trust gave Noel an idea of his new power. He was at home. Henceforth, in this magnificent house, he was to be master—the heir ! His eye, which ran over the entire room,

was caught by a genealogical table, hanging above the mantel. He went up to it, and read it.

It was a page, and one of the most illustrious, taken from the golden book of French nobility. Every name which has a place in our history was there. The Commarins had mingled their blood with all the great houses—two of them had even married daughters of the reigning family. A warm glow of pride filled the advocate's heart ; his pulse beat quicker. He raised his head haughtily, as he muttered :

" Viscount de Commarin ! "

The door opened. He turned, and saw the count entering.

At once Noel bowed respectfully. He was petrified by the look of hatred, anger, contempt on his father's face.

A shiver ran through his veins. His teeth chattered ; he saw that he was lost.

" Wretch ! " cried the count.

And, dreading his own violence, the old gentleman threw his cane into a corner.

He was unwilling to strike his son ; he considered him unworthy of being struck by his hands.

After he had entered, there was a moment of mortal silence which seemed to them both a century.

Both at the same time were filled with bitter thoughts, which would require a volume to transcribe.

Noel took courage, and spoke first.

" Monsieur——" he began.

" Silence ! " exclaimed the count hoarsely ; " keep silent. It may be—heaven forgive me !—that you are my son ! Alas, I cannot doubt it now ! Wretch ! you knew well that you were Madame Gerdy's son. Infamous creature ! you have not only committed this murder, but you have caused an innocent man to be charged with your crime. Murderer ! you have also killed your mother."

The advocate attempted to stammer forth a protest.

" You killed her," continued the count with increased energy, " if not by poison, at least by your crimes. I understand all now ; she was not delirious this morning. But you knew well what she would say. You were listening ; and, if you dared to enter at the moment when one word would have destroyed you, it was because you calculated the effect of your presence. It was to you that she spoke that last word, ' Murderer ! ' "

Little by little, Noel had retired to the end of the room ;

and he stood leaning against the wall, his head thrown back, his hair on end, his eye haggard. A convulsive shudder seized him. His face betrayed a terror most horrible to see—the terror of a discovered criminal.

" I know all, you see," continued the count ; " and I am not alone in that knowledge. At this moment a warrant of arrest is issued against you."

A cry of rage, like a hollow rattle, burst from the advocate. His lips, which were hanging through terror, now grew firm. Overwhelmed in the very midst of his triumph, he struggled against his fright. He recovered himself with a look of defiance.

M. de Commarin, without seeming to pay any attention to Noel, approached a desk, and opened a drawer.

" My duty," said he, " would be to leave you to the executioner who awaits you ; but I remember that I have the misfortune to be your father. Sit down ; write and sign a confession of your crime. You will then find firearms in that drawer. May heaven forgive you ! "

The old gentleman moved towards the door. Noel stopped him ; and, drawing at the same time a revolver from his pocket :

" Your firearms are needless, monsieur," he said. " My precautions, you see, are taken ; they will never take me alive. But——"

" But ? " repeated the count harshly.

" I must tell you, monsieur," continued the advocate coldly, " that I do not see fit to kill myself—at least, at present."

" Ah ! " cried M. de Commarin in disgust, " you are a coward ! "

" No, monsieur, not a coward ; but I will not give in until I am sure that every opening is closed against me, —that I cannot save myself."

" Miserable wretch ! " said the count, threatening ; " then I must do it."

He moved towards the drawer ; but Noel closed it with a slam.

" Listen to me, monsieur," said the advocate in that hoarse, quick tone which imminent danger gives a man ; " do not waste in vain words the few moments' respite left me. I have committed a crime, it is true, and I do not attempt to justify it ; but who laid the foundation of it, if

not yourself? Now, you do me the favour of offering me a pistol. Thanks. I must decline it. This generosity is not through any regard for me : you only wish to avoid the scandal of my trial, and the disgrace which cannot fail to reflect upon your name."

The count was about to reply.

" Give me leave," interrupted Noel imperiously. " I decline killing myself ; I wish to save my life, if possible. Supply me with the means of escape ; and I promise you that I will die before I am captured. I say, supply me with means ; for I have not twenty francs to my name. My last banknote was burnt the day when—you understand me. There isn't enough in my mother's house to give her a decent burial. Then, some money."

" Never ! "

" Then I will deliver myself up ; and you will see the effect upon the name you hold so dear ! "

The count, mad with rage, jumped to his desk for a pistol. Noel placed himself before him.

" Oh, do not struggle ! " said he coldly. " I am the stronger."

M. de Commarin recoiled.

By thus speaking of the trial, of scandal, disgrace, the advocate had made an impression upon him.

For a moment hesitating between love for his name and his burning desire to see this wretch punished, the old gentleman stood undecided.

Finally his feeling for his position triumphed.

" Let us end this," he said in a voice trembling and filled with the utmost contempt ; " let us end this disgraceful scene. What do you ask ? "

" I have told you, money—all that you have here. But decide quickly."

On Saturday the count had drawn from his bankers the sum he had set aside for fitting up the rooms of him whom he thought his legitimate child.

" I have eighty thousand francs here," he replied.

" That's very little," said the advocate ; " but give them to me. I had counted upon five hundred thousand francs from you. If I succeed in escaping my pursuers, you must hold at my disposal the balance, four hundred and twenty thousand francs. Will you pledge yourself to give them to me at the first demand ? I will find some means of sending

for them without risk to myself. At that price, you need never fear seeing me again."

For his only reply, the count opened a little iron chest imbedded in the wall, and drew out a roll of banknotes, which he threw at Noel's feet.

A gleam of anger flashed in the advocate's eyes, as he took one step towards his father.

" Oh, do not push me too far ! " he said threateningly. " People who, like me, have nothing to lose are dangerous. I may free myself, and——"

He bent down, however, and picked up the notes.

" Will you give me your word," he continued, " to let me have the rest ? "

" Yes."

" Then I am going. Do not fear. I will be faithful to our bargain : they shall not take me alive. Adieu, my father. You are the true criminal ; but you will escape punishment. Ah, heaven is not just ! I curse you."

When, an hour later, the servants entered the count's study, they found him stretched on the floor, his face against the carpet, with scarcely a sign of life.

But Noel left the house, and staggered up the Rue Université.

It seemed to him that the pavement reeled beneath his feet, and that everything about him was turning.

But, at the same time, strange to relate, he felt an incredible relief, almost delight.

Honest Balan's theory was correct.

It was ended. All was over ; he was ruined. No more anguish now, no more useless fright and foolish terrors, no more dissembling, struggling. Henceforth there was nothing more to fear. His horrible rôle played to the bitter end, he could lay aside his mask and breathe freely.

An irresistible weariness succeeded to the highly wrought passion which had sustained him before the count destroyed his impudent arrogance. All the springs of his being, stretched for a week beyond their limits, now relaxed and gave way. The fever which for the last eight days had kept him up failed him now ; and, with the weariness, he felt an imperative need of rest. He experienced a great void, an utter indifference for everything.

His insensibility bore a striking resemblance to that felt by people afflicted with sea-sickness ; who care for nothing,

whom no sensations are capable of moving, who have neither strength nor courage to think, and who could not be aroused from their lethargy by the presence of any great danger, not even of death itself.

They might have arrested him then ; and he would never have thought of resisting, nor of defending himself : he could not have taken a step to hide, to fly, to save himself in any way.

For a moment he had serious thoughts of giving himself up as a prisoner, in order to secure peace, to gain quiet, to free himself from this anxiety about his safety.

But he struggled against this dull stupor. The reaction came, shaking off this weakness of mind and body.

The consciousness of his position, of his danger, came to him. He foresaw, with horror, the scaffold, as one sees the abyss by the flashes of lightning.

" I must save my life," he thought. " But how ? "

That mortal terror which deprives the murderer of even ordinary common sense seized him.

He looked eagerly about him, and thought he noticed three or four passers-by look at him curiously. His terror increased.

He began running in the direction of the Latin Quarter without purpose, without aim, running for the sake of running, to escape himself—like Crime, as represented by the painter, fleeing under the lashes of the Furies.

He very soon stopped, however, seeing that this extraordinary procedure attracted attention.

It seemed that everyone was on the point of denouncing him as the murderer : he thought he read contempt and horror upon every face, suspicion in every eye.

He walked along instinctively repeating to himself :

" I must follow some plan ! "

But, in this horrible excitement, he was incapable of seeing anything, of thinking, planning, determining, deciding.

When he first thought of the crime, he had said to himself, " I may be discovered." And, with this in sight, he had perfected a plan which should put him beyond all fear of pursuit. He would do this and that ; he would have recourse to this ruse, he would take that precaution. Useless forethought. Nothing of this plan seemed feasible now. They were seeking for him ; and he could think of no place in the whole world where he would feel perfectly safe.

He was near the Odéon, when a thought quicker than a flash of lightning lit up the darkness of his brain.

He thought that they were doubtless already in pursuit of him ; his description would be given everywhere ; his white cravat and well-dressed whiskers would betray him as surely as though he carried a placard.

Seeing a barber's shop, he went to the door ; but while turning the knob he grew frightened.

They would think it singular that he wanted his beard shaved ; and if they should question him . . .

He passed on.

He saw another barber's shop ; and the same doubts prevented his entering.

Gradually night came on ; and, with the darkness, Noel seemed to recover his confidence and boldness.

After this great shipwreck in port, hope arose again to the surface. Why could he not save himself ?

There had been many just such cases. He would go to a foreign country, change his name, begin life over again, become a new man entirely. He had the money ; and that was the principal thing.

And, besides, when these eighty thousand francs were spent, he had the certainty of receiving, on his first request, five or six times as much more.

He was already thinking of the disguise he should assume, and the frontier to which he should go, when a recollection of Juliette crossed his heart like a hot iron.

Was he going to escape without her, go away with the certainty of never seeing her again ?

Should he fly, pursued by all the police in the world, tracked like a deer, and she remain peaceably in Paris ? Impossible. For whom had he committed this crime ? For her. Who reaped the benefits of it ? She. Was it not just, then, that she should bear her share of the punishment ?

" She does not love me," thought the advocate, with bitterness ; " she never loved me. She would be delighted to be for ever free from me. She will not regret me, now that I can be of no more use to her. An empty coffer is an unserviceable piece of furniture. Juliette is prudent ; she has managed to save a pretty little fortune. Grown rich at my expense, she will take some new lover. She will forget me : she will live happily ; while I—— And I was going away without her."

The voice of prudence cried out to him. " Wretched man ! to drag a woman with you, and such a woman, is but to draw attention upon you, to render flight impossible, to give yourself up out of mere wantonness."

" What of that ? " cried passion. " We will be saved, or we will perish together. If she does not love me, I love her. She is a necessity to me. She must come, or——"

But how to see Juliette, to speak with her, to persuade her.

To go to her house would expose him too much. The police were doubtless there already.

" No," thought Noel ; " no one knows that she is my mistress. They won't find it out for two or three days ; and, besides, it would be more dangerous still to write."

He took a carriage from the stand not far from the square L'Observatoire, and in a low tone told the driver the fatal number of the house in the Rue Provence.

Stretched on the cushions of the carriage, lulled by its monotonous rattle, Noel gave no thought to the future ; he did not even think over what he would say to Juliette. No. Involuntarily he passed in review the events which had brought on and hastened the catastrophe, like a man who, near his death, reviews the tragedy or comedy of his life.

He thought over the past month, day by day.

Ruined, without expedients, without resources, he had determined at all hazards to procure money, still to keep Madame Juliette ; when one day chance made him master of the correspondence of the Count de Commarin—not only the letters read to Père Tabaret, and shown to Albert, but also those which, written by the count when he believed the substitution accomplished, plainly established the fact.

The reading of these gave him an hour of mad delight.

He believed himself the legitimate son ; but soon his mother undeceived him, told him the truth, proved it to him by many letters from the Widow Lerouge, called Claudine to witness it, and demonstrated it by the scar he bore.

But a drowning man never chooses what branch he will draw himself out by. He takes the first that comes. Noel resolved to make use of these letters.

He attempted to use his ascendancy over his mother, to induce her to leave the count in his ignorance, so that he might thus blackmail him. But Madame Gerdy repulsed this proposition with horror.

Then the advocate made a confession of all his follies, laid bare his financial condition, showed himself in his true light, sunk in debt ; and he begged his mother to have recourse to M. de Commarin.

This also she refused ; and prayers and threats availed nothing against her resolution. For five days there was a great struggle between mother and son, in which the advocate was finally conquered.

It was then that the idea of murdering Claudine occurred to him.

The unhappy woman had been no more frank with Madame Gerdy than with others, and Noel thought her a widow. Her testimony suppressed, therefore, who else stood in his way ?

Madame Gerdy, and perhaps the count.

He feared them but little.

If Madame Gerdy spoke, he could always reply, " You have stolen my name for your son, and you will do anything in the world to preserve it for him." But how to do away with Claudine without danger ?

After long reflection the advocate thought of a diabolical stratagem.

He would burn all the count's letters establishing the substitution, and preserve only those rendering it probable.

These last he would show to Albert, feeling sure that, if justice ever inquired into the matter, it would naturally suspect him who appeared to have so much interest in Claudine's death.

Not that he really thought of attaching the crime upon Albert ; it was simply a precaution. He counted upon so arranging matters that the police would lose their trouble in the pursuit of an imaginary criminal.

Nor did he think of ousting the Viscount de Commarin, and putting himself in his place.

His plan was simply, the crime once committed, he would wait ; things would take their own course. He would negotiate, he would compromise, at the price of a fortune.

He felt sure of his mother's silence, provided she never suspected him of the assassination.

His plans laid, he decided to strike the fatal blow on Shrove Tuesday.

To neglect no precaution, he would that evening himself take Juliette to the theatre, and afterwards to the opera ball.

He would thus secure, in case things went wrong, an unanswerable alibi.

The loss of his great coat troubled him for a moment ; but, upon reflection, he reassured himself, saying :

" Pshaw ! who will ever know ? "

Everything had resulted in accordance with his calculations. He thought that now it was but a matter of patience.

But, when Madame Gerdy read the story of the murder, the unhappy woman divined her son's work ; and, in the first transports of her grief, she declared that she would denounce him.

He was terrified. A mad fear of his mother possessed him. One word from her might destroy him. Putting a bold face on it, however, he took the chances, staking his all.

To put the police on Albert's track was to guarantee his own safety, to ensure to himself, in case of success, the name and fortune of the Count de Commarin.

Circumstances, as well as his own terror, had increased his boldness and his acuteness.

Père Tabaret's visit occurred just then.

Noel knew of his connection with the police, and knew that the old fellow would make a most valuable confidant.

So long as Madame Gerdy lived, Noel trembled. The fever was untrustworthy, and might betray him. But, when she had breathed her last, he believed himself safe. He thought it all over ; he could see no obstacle in his way ; he had triumphed.

And now all was discovered, just as he was about to reap the benefits. But how ? By whom ? What fatality had unearthed a secret which he had believed buried with Madame Gerdy ?

But what boots it, when one is at the bottom of an abyss, to know what stone had given way, to ask by what descent he had fallen ?

The hack stopped in the Rue Provence.

Noel leaned out of the door, searching the neighbourhood, throwing a glance into the depths of the porter's lodge.

Seeing no one, he paid his fare through the front window, before getting out of the carriage, and, crossing the pavement with a bound, he leaped up the stairway.

Charlotte, at sight of him, gave a shout of joy.

" You are here ! " she cried. " Ah, madame has been

expecting you with the greatest impatience ! She is very anxious."

Juliette expecting him ! Juliette anxious !

The advocate did not stop to ask questions. On reaching this spot, he seemed suddenly to recover his coolness. He could understand his imprudence ; he knew the exact value of every instant.

" If anyone rings," said he to Charlotte, " don't let them in. No matter what they do or say, don't let them in."

On hearing Noel's voice, Juliette ran out to meet him. He pushed her gruffly into the salon, and followed, closing the door.

There for the first time she saw his face.

He was so changed, his look was so haggard, that she could not keep from crying out :

" What is the matter ? "

Noel made no reply ; he advanced towards and took her hand.

" Juliette," he demanded in a hollow voice, fastening his flashing eyes upon her—" Juliette, be sincere. Do you love me ? "

She instinctively felt that something dreadful had occurred : she seemed to breathe an atmosphere of evil ; but she, as usual, affected indifference.

" You ill-natured fellow," she replied, pouting her lips most provokingly, " do you deserve——"

" Oh, enough ! " broke in Noel, stamping his feet fiercely. " Answer me," he continued, bruising her pretty hands in his grasp, " yes, or no—do you love me ? "

A hundred times had she played with her lover's anger, delighting to excite him into a fury, to enjoy the pleasure of appeasing him with a word ; but she had never seen him like this before.

She had wronged him greatly ; and she dared not complain of this his first harshness.

" Yes, I love you," she stammered. " Do you not know it ? "

" Why ? " replied the advocate, releasing her hands. " Why ? Because, if you love me, you must prove it. If you love me, you must follow me at once—abandon everything. Come, fly with me. Time presses——"

The young girl was terrified.

" Great heavens ! what has happened ? "

" Nothing, except that I have loved you too much, Juliette. When I found I had no more money for your luxury, your caprices, I became wild. To procure money, I—I committed a crime—a crime. Do you understand? They are pursuing me now. I must fly : will you follow me ? "

Juliette's eyes grew wide with astonishment ; but she doubted Noel.

" A crime ? You ? " she began.

" Yes, me ! Would you know the truth ? I have committed murder. But it was all for you."

The advocate felt that Juliette would certainly recoil from him in horror. He expected that terror which a murderer inspires. He was resigned to it in advance. He thought that she would fly from him : perhaps there would be a scene. She might have hysterics ; might cry out, call for succour, for help, for aid. He was wrong.

With a bound, Juliette flew to him, throwing herself upon him, her arms about his neck, and embraced him as she had never embraced him before.

" Yes, I do love you ! " she cried. " Yes, you have committed a crime for my sake, because you loved me. You have a heart. I never really knew you before ! "

It had cost him dear to inspire this passion in Madame Juliette ; but Noel never thought of that.

He experienced a moment of intense delight ; nothing appeared hopeless to him now.

But he had the presence of mind to free himself from her embrace.

" Let us go," he said. " The one great danger is, that I do not know from whence the attack comes. How they have discovered the truth is still a mystery to me."

Juliette remembered her alarming visitor of the afternoon ; she understood it all.

" Oh, what a wretched woman I am ! " she cried, wringing her hands in despair. " It is I who have betrayed you. It occurred on Tuesday, did it not ? "

" Yes, Tuesday."

" Ah, then I have told all, without a doubt, to your friend, the old man I supposed you had sent, Tabaret ! "

" Has Tabaret been here ? "

" Yes ; just a little while ago."

" Come, then," cried Noel, " quickly. It's a miracle that he hasn't been back."

He took her arm, to hurry her away ; but she nimbly released herself.

" Wait," said she. " I have some money, some jewels. I will take them."

" It is useless. Leave everything behind. I have a fortune, Juliette. Let us fly ! "

She had already opened her jewel-box, and was throwing everything of value that she possessed pell-mell into a little travelling-bag.

" Ah, you are ruining me," cried Noel, " you are ruining me ! "

He spoke thus ; but his heart was overflowing with joy.

" What sublime devotion ! She loves me truly," he said to himself ; " for me, she renounces this happy life without hesitation ; for me, she sacrifices all ! "

Juliette had finished her preparations, and was quietly tying on her bonnet, when the door-bell rang.

" They are here ! " cried Noel, becoming, if possible, even more livid.

They stood as immovable as two statues ; great drops of perspiration on their foreheads, their eyes dilated, listening breathlessly.

A second ring was heard, then a third.

Charlotte appeared, walking on tiptoe.

" There are a great many at the door," she whispered. " I heard them talking together."

Growing tired of ringing, they began pounding. A voice reached the salon ; they distinguished but the one word " law."

" No hope ! " murmured Noel.

" Don't despair," cried Juliette. " The servant's stairway ! "

" They will scarcely leave that unguarded."

Then Juliette became depressed, terrified.

She was surprised by heavy steps on the stairway, made by someone endeavouring to walk softly.

" There must be some escape ! " she cried fiercely.

" Yes," replied Noel, " one way. I have given my word. They will pick the lock. Bolt all the doors, and make them break them down : it will gain time for me."

Juliette and Charlotte sprang forward to do this. Noel, leaning against the mantel, took out his revolver, and placed it against his breast.

But Juliette, who had returned, perceiving the movement, threw herself headlong upon her lover, to prevent his purpose, but so violently that the pistol was discharged. The shot took effect, the ball passing through Noel's stomach. He gave a terrible cry.

Juliette had made his death a terrible punishment ; she had only prolonged his agony.

He staggered, but did not fall, supporting himself by the mantel, while the blood flowed copiously.

Juliette clung to him, trying to wrest the pistol from him.

" You shall not kill yourself," she cried, " you shall not. You are mine ; I love you. Let them come. What can they do to you ? If they imprison you, you can escape. I will aid you : we will bribe the jailors. Come. We will live so happily, no matter where, far off in America, where no one knows us ! "

The outside door had yielded ; they were now at work at the door of the antechamber.

" Hush ! " murmured Noel. " They must not take me alive ! "

And, with one last effort, triumphing over his dreadful agony, he released himself, and pushed Juliette away, who fell back on a near sofa.

Then, seizing the revolver, he applied it anew to the place where he felt his heart beating, pulled the trigger, and rolled to the floor.

It was full time ; for the police at that moment burst open the door.

The first thought of the detectives was that Noel, before shooting himself, had shot his mistress.

They knew of cases where people had romantically desired to quit this world together ; and had they not heard two shots ? But Juliette was already on her feet again.

" A doctor," she cried, " a doctor ! He cannot be dead ! "

One man ran out ; while the others, under the direction of Père Tabaret, carried the advocate's body, and laid it on Madame Juliette's bed.

" He cannot live ! " murmured the old man, whose anger left him at the sight. " I loved him as though he were my child. His name is still on my will ! "

Père Tabaret stopped. Noel uttered a groan, and opened his eyes.

" You see that he will live ! " cried Juliette.

The advocate shook his head feebly, and, for a moment, he tossed himself painfully on the bed, passing his right hand first under his coat, and then under his pillow.

He turned himself half-way towards the wall, and then back again.

Upon a sign, easily understood, they placed another pillow beneath his head.

Then, in a broken, stifled voice, he spoke a few words.

" I am the murderer," he said. " Write, I will sign it ; it will free Albert. I owe him that at least."

While they were writing, he drew Juliette to him.

" My fortune is beneath the pillow," he whispered. " I give it all to you."

A flow of blood burst from his mouth ; and they thought he was dying.

But he still had strength enough to sign the confession, and to launch a joke at Père Tabaret.

" Ah-ha, old fellow ! " he said, " so you are a detective, eh ? It must be great fun to trap one's friends ! Ah, I have had a fine game ; but, with three women in the play, you are always sure to lose."

He fell back in agony ; and, when the doctor arrived, he could only announce the death of Maître Noel Gerdy, advocate.

CHAPTER XX

Some months later, one evening, at old Mademoiselle Goello's, the Marquise d'Arlanges, looking ten years younger than when we saw her last, was giving her dowager friends an account of the wedding of her granddaughter Claire, who had married the Viscount Albert de Commarin.

" The marriage," she said, " took place on our estate in Normandy, without any flourish of trumpets. My son-in-law wished it ; but I disapproved heartily. The noise about the mistake of which he had been the victim would have only added interest in the wedding. That was my opinion ; and I made no effort to conceal it. Pshaw ! the boy is as stubborn as his father, which is saying a good deal. He persisted in his course ; and my shameless grandchild, obedient to her future husband, took her stand against me. And yet I defy anyone to find to-day a single individual with courage enough to confess that he ever for an instant

doubted Albert's innocence. I have left the young people in all the happiness of the honeymoon, billing and cooing like a pair of turtle-doves. They have paid dearly, though, for their happiness. May they be happy, and may they have lots of children ! for they will find no difficulty in providing for them. For, do you know, for the first time in his life, and probably for the last, the count has behaved like an angel ! He has settled absolutely all his fortune on his son. He intends living alone at one of his country-seats. I don't think the old man is quite himself. I am not sure that he has entirely recovered his head since that attack ; but my grandchild is nicely settled. I know what it has cost me, and how economical I shall have to be ; but I despise parents who hesitate at any pecuniary sacrifice when the happiness of their children is at stake."

The marquise forgot, however, to state that, a week before the wedding, Albert had freed her from a very embarrassing situation, and had discharged a very considerable amount of her debts.

Since then she had borrowed from him only nine thousand francs ; but she intended confessing to him some day how much she was annoyed by an upholsterer, by her dressmaker, by three linen drapers, and by five or six other tradesmen.

Ah, well, she was a worthy woman. She never spoke any evil about her son-in-law !

Taking refuge in Poitou, after sending in his resignation, Daburon sought rest and forgetfulness. His friends, however, do not despair of some time inducing him to marry.

Madame Juliette was entirely consoled. The eighty thousand francs hidden by Noel under the pillows were not taken from her. She had much more beside, as it was not long before the sale of her magnificently furnished apartments was announced.

Père Tabaret alone was indelibly impressed. After having believed in the infallibility of justice, he now saw no errors so great as those which the law commits.

The old amateur detective doubted the existence of crime, and believed that the evidence of one's senses proved nothing. He circulated a petition for the abolition of capital punishment, and organised a society for aiding poor and innocent victims of the law.

THE END

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